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## Top foods to keep your heart, mind and bones strong as you age

The right foods can keep hearts and bones healthy as you age

Building muscle mass is critical to maintaining balance and stability

Getting enough fluids is key



Homero Lavernia, 63, in his kitchen in Doral. Lavernia has been seeing a UM nutritionist for about three months.

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BY ROCHELLE KOFF

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At 63, Homero Lavernia is a true believer in the power of diet and exercise to revitalize your health.

It wasn't until he was on the verge of needing insulin for type 2 diabetes that Lavernia decided he had to make big changes in his diet and lifestyle. He met with diabetes specialists, as well as [Amy Kimberlain](#), a registered dietitian and certified [diabetes](#) educator for the University of Miami Health System and Miller School of Medicine, who helped him set up a plan.

"For years, my doctors said 'do this and do that' and I didn't make those changes," said the Doral insurance agent. "In December, my results were really bad. In January, I started doing what I was supposed to do."

He started eating a healthier diet with more fruits and vegetables, nuts, whole grains and lean protein. "I used to eat a lot of red meat but not anymore," said Lavernia, who has lost 25 pounds since January. "Now I eat fish, chicken and turkey."

Lavernia walks an hour after work every day and often longer on weekends. “It has helped me so much,” he said.

Changing his diet was the hardest part. “I love ice cream and I’m sad I can’t eat that. Well, maybe once in a while. “

Still, even cutting back on ice cream has been worth the payoff in health and adding years to his life. “I feel great compared to how I felt a few months ago. It’s like night and day,” Lavernia said. “I sleep better. My diabetes and high blood pressure are under control and I never thought they’d be under control.”

Forget the search for shortcuts, said [Marie Almon](#), a registered dietitian with Baptist Health Primary Care.

“We can’t reverse the clock but we can definitely improve our quality of life,” Almon said. “Making individuals more aware and knowledgeable about foods and nutrition can prolong our years.”

We also have to be concerned about keeping our hearts and bones healthy, building muscle mass and getting enough fluids.

“As we get older, we tend not to drink as much,” said [Lillian Craggs-Dino](#), a registered dietitian at Cleveland Clinic Florida in Weston. “Our body is over 60 percent water and every bodily function requires water.”

Almon calls water the “forgotten nutrient.”

She also stressed the importance of getting enough protein to help build muscle mass. Look for lean cuts of meat, such as fish, chicken and turkey, eggs and beans as good sources.

“If you don’t have enough protein, your muscles break down,” Almon said. “That can make people more prone to falling and lead to bone fractures.

Adding daily walks and strength training is essential in building muscle, nutritionists said. And it’s never too soon to start. Even those in their 40s and 50s “need to really look at a general wellness approach to life,” said [Simone de Oliveira](#), a registered dietitian specializing in geriatric nutrition at United HomeCare, which provides home health care in Miami-Dade County.

As people age, their “sensors and synapses are not working as well as they did in their 30s, 40s and 50s,” de Oliveira said. “The brain is not receiving that indication that they need to eat. Caregivers worry about their relative not eating and becoming malnourished.”

The [Alzheimer’s Association](#) refers to a ‘brain healthy diet’ as “one that reduces the risk of heart disease and diabetes, encourages good blood flow to the brain, and is low in fat

and cholesterol. Studies have found that a diet rich in vegetables, especially green leafy vegetables and cruciferous vegetables like broccoli, is associated with a reduced rate of cognitive decline, according to the National Institute on Aging.

“The overall goal is the prevention of mental deterioration, and if choosing certain foods over others can help, then why not do so,” de Oliveira said.

The produce aisle is a good place to start. Fruits and vegetables, especially choices in bright colors, are packed with antioxidants that protect the body’s cells from the damage of oxidation caused by unhealthy influences like smoking, pollution, fried foods and toxins which weaken the molecules in your cells, nutritionists said.

“Antioxidants protect your cells from aging and dying,” Craggs-Dino said.

When planning your diet, what you leave off your plate can be nearly as important as what you add. You’ll want to eliminate empty-calorie, processed, sugary and high-fat items.

“Look for foods that are natural and healthy,” Craggs-Dino said. “Be choosy. We should all be doing that at any age.”

## 10 SUPER FOODS

These foods will help you reduce the risk of chronic disease and increase your chances for a longer, healthier life.

**Apples:** Apples are a leading source of quercetin, an antioxidant plant chemical that defends your brain cells from free radical attacks that can damage the outer lining of delicate neurons and lead to cognitive decline, said United HomeCare’s de Oliveira. To get the most quercetin be sure to eat your apples with the skin on since that is where the greater concentration is found.

**Blackberries, blueberries:** “You want to get more mileage out of your food,” said Baptist’s Almon and these berries pack a nutritional wallop. They’re a good source of vitamins C, E and folate and the purple pigment anthocyanin, a type of flavonoid, is “all important in chronic disease prevention,” writes nutritionist and author P.K. Newby in National Geographic’s magazine “Superfoods. Eat Your Way to Health and Longevity.” Berries fight inflammation “and encourage communication between neurons, improving our ability to gather up new information,” said de Oliveira. Frozen berries are an all-year option. She also suggests Concord Grape Juice containing the heart-healthy polyphenols found in red wine. “You don’t want sugary, watered-down grape juice.”

**Cinnamon:** Researchers are finding lots of health benefits in this aromatic spice. Cleveland Clinic’s Craggs-Dino said it’s “healthy for the blood.” Cinnamon is also showing benefits for the brain, said de Oliveira. “Beta-amyloid plaques are one of the

trademarks of Alzheimer's disease. The other important culprits are the tangles in the brain made of tau proteins that cause brain cells to die. Emerging research from the University of California in Santa Barbara reveals that two compounds in cinnamon — proanthocyanidins and cinnamaldehyde — may inactivate these tau proteins," she said.

**Extra Virgin Olive Oil:** The oil, part of the Mediterranean diet, can help lower your cholesterol and control insulin levels in the body, according to the experts. "Amyloid B-derived diffusible ligands (ADDLs) are Alzheimer's inducing proteins that are toxic to the brain," de Oliveira said. "In the initial stages of the disease they attach to the brain cells rendering them unable to communicate with one another and eventually leading to memory loss. Extra virgin olive oil is rich in oleocanthal, a compound that disables the dangerous ADDLs." She suggests uncooked olive oil is most beneficial. Drizzle it on salads, veggies or serve it with bread.

**Oats:** The grain is an excellent source of soluble fiber, which helps stabilize blood sugar, slow digestion and reduce cholesterol levels and the risk of heart disease. A breakfast of hot oatmeal with bananas, berries and a dusting of cinnamon is a super power breakfast. Whole grains — including oats, quinoa, barley, brown rice and whole wheat — are all nutrient rich.

**Spinach:** "Green leafy vegetables are all healthy but you want more bang for your buck," said Craggs-Dino. "If you were choosing between zucchini and spinach, you'd want spinach." Spinach "is very high in nutrients that prevent dementia such as folate, vitamin E and vitamin K," said de Oliveira. "Only one-half cup of cooked spinach provides a third of the folate and five times the vitamin K of your daily needs." Kale is still a superstar as well, Baptist's Almon said. Escarole, arugula and Swiss chard are other top choices.

**Salmon:** The popular fish "is a terrific source of Omega 3 fatty acids," said Almon. Omega 3 fatty acids build brain cells, help keep your heart healthy and protect against stroke. Your body doesn't make omega-3 fatty acids on its own so you have to get them from your diet. Other fish rich in Omega 3 fatty acids include mackerel, sardines, herring and albacore tuna (if you get canned tuna, get it packed with water instead of oil). Salmon is a leading source of DHA, the predominant omega-3 fat in your brain, believed to protect against Alzheimer's disease, de Oliveira said. "It is also nature's number one source of vitamin D, a nutrient that plays a role in the prevention of cognitive decline."

**Turmeric:** Chances are you've tasted the ancient yellow spice, a cousin of ginger, in your favorite curries. The superstar of spices may have anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer benefits "Turmeric is especially rich in curcumin, a compound believed to inhibit Alzheimer's disease in multiple ways," de Oliveira said. "Not only does it block the formation of beta amyloid plaques, it also fights inflammation and lowers artery clogging

cholesterol which can reduce blood flow to your brain.” Try turmeric with scrambled eggs, in a stir-fry or to spice up veggies.

**Walnuts:** The nut has a high concentration of Omega 3 fatty acids or “good fats,” which may help boost brain function, said UM’s Kimberlain. Studies are looking at the walnut as effective in reducing inflammation, lowering blood pressure and “bad” cholesterol as well as lowering the risk of type 2 diabetes. Kimberlain advises eating a variety of nuts, including almonds and peanuts, for the best overall nutrition.

**Yogurt:** The creamy cultured milk is known for helping your digestive tract. It’s also a source of calcium and protein, along with low-fat dairy products including fortified almond or soy milk. Nutritionists suggest plain Greek yogurt. “Just check the labels and be careful of added sugar,” Almon said.