

# To Your Health Newsletter

“Promoting Good Health Through Information”

Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System

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## Healthy Cognitive Aging

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“Senior moments” and “old dogs can’t learn new tricks” are two myths that strike fear in the hearts of many aging adults. However, severe cognitive (thinking and memory) impairments like Alzheimer’s disease are not part of the normal aging process. In fact “old dogs” can indeed learn new tricks to slow down cognitive decline. We’ll talk about normal memory changes occurring with aging and how someone can slow down these changes.

### What are normal memory changes?

Although dementia is not a normal part of aging, there are changes in cognitive function that occur with age. The ability to process and respond to information decreases as you age, which can make it harder to multi-task. Different types of memory, like your ability to keep information in your mind for short periods of time and your ability to remember to do something in the future, show decline with age. Older adults may experience difficulty recalling names of people or finding the correct word to use, often called a “tip of the tongue” experience. However, the ability to recall previously learned information and episodes in your life typically remains stable after reaching adulthood, only showing small declines with age.

### How can I improve my memory (or at least slow down the cognitive aging process)?

Adults who have learned techniques to compensate for memory issues (like using reminder notes or calendars) can maintain good memory functioning. Additionally, cognitive benefits have been shown for those who have adopted healthy activities such as cognitive training, mental stimulation, social interaction, managing stress, health behaviors, and exercise:

- Formal cognitive training can include learning techniques for improving memory like creating a word using the first letters of the information you need to remember. Training can also focus on increasing your speed in responding to information or shifting attention more fluidly when engaging in multiple tasks.
- Mentally stimulating activities like taking a class, playing chess, reading, or traveling can also positively impact cognitive functioning. Remaining socially active and having positive social relationships promotes good cognitive health.
- High levels of stress are related to difficulties concentrating and recalling information as well as higher rates of dementia. Conversely, decreasing your level of stress and negative emotions is related to slowing cognitive decline and decreasing the risk for serious cognitive impairments like Alzheimer’s disease. Utilizing strategies to manage stress (such as breathing techniques, yoga, meditation, asking for help when needed, etc.) has been shown to increase focus and help improve the ability to respond to various day-to-day demands.
- Aerobic exercise is important for your cognitive health and can prevent cognitive decline in older adults. A recent study published in *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience* found that even simple exercise (such as walking 45 minutes a day three times a week) can improve memory, decision-making, and other cognitive functions.
- Other health behaviors like proper nutrition, not smoking, and decreasing the risk behaviors related to diabetes, strokes, and hypertension can also help preserve cognitive functioning. What is good for the body is good for the brain!

Hopefully these memory tips will help you on your path to aging gracefully!

# Recipe for Health

## RAINBOW FRUIT SALAD

Take advantage of the bounty of summer fruits! Good as a side dish or dessert, this salad made from fresh fruit is naturally low in fat, saturated fat, and sodium and is cholesterol free.

### Ingredients:

#### Fruit salad:

- 1 large mango, peeled and diced
- 2 cups fresh blueberries
- 2 whole bananas, sliced
- 2 cups fresh strawberries, halved
- 2 cups seedless grapes
- 2 whole nectarines, unpeeled and sliced
- 1 whole kiwi fruit, peeled and sliced

#### Honey orange sauce:

- 1/3 cup unsweetened orange juice
- 2 tbsp lemon juice
- 1-1/2 tbsp honey
- 1/4 tsp ground ginger
- Dash of nutmeg

### Directions:

1. Prepare the fruit.
2. Combine all the ingredients for the sauce and mix.
3. Just before serving, pour honey orange sauce over the fruit.

**Yield:** 12 servings

**Serving size:** 4-ounce cup

### Each serving provides:

- Calories: 96
- Total fat: 1 g
- Saturated fat: <1 g
- Cholesterol: 0 mg
- Sodium: 4 mg

*[www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)*

# Calcium and Vitamin D: Cutting Through the Hype

*Ariane Wilson, PharmD, PGY1 Pharmacy Resident*

There has been a lot of buzz in the media about calcium and Vitamin D and how they influence total body health. Vitamin D, in particular, has been the subject of much of speculation as the latest cure-all for what ails you. Vitamin D's role in bone health is established, but its function in the health of other body systems isn't fully understood. Recent studies have tried to determine Vitamin D's larger role in our overall well-being, including immune system function, cancer risk reduction and heart health.

## What is Vitamin D, and how does calcium fit in?

Vitamin D is a nutrient that can be obtained from your diet, but can also be made by your body when exposed to sunlight. It aids in the absorption, use and excretion of calcium and phosphorous and regulates the hardening of bone. Calcium is a mineral obtained from your diet that is an essential part of the hardened structural network found in bones and teeth. When taken with Vitamin D, calcium is better absorbed and used by your body. Both calcium and vitamin D are important factors in maintaining skeletal health and warding off brittle bones.

## How do I make sense of all the information out there?

There are hundreds of studies published on Vitamin D and calcium supplementation, and sifting through all that literature is an overwhelming prospect. Fortunately, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released the "2011 Report on Dietary Reference Intakes for Calcium and Vitamin D" in January of this year. This comprehensive report reviews the literature and gives some recommendations based on published data. The report concludes that available evidence strongly supports calcium and Vitamin D supplementation for bone health. However, for health outcomes not related to bones—such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease—the evidence was not clear and could not be used to guide recommendations.

Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for calcium and Vitamin D, as well as target Vitamin D blood levels, are addressed in the IOM report. The IOM RDAs were determined to meet the needs of 97.5% of the population:

**Calcium:** 700 to 1300 mg/day for most people >1 year of age

**Vitamin D:** 600 IU/day for most people 1–70 years of age

800 IU/day for most people >71 years of age

**Goal serum 25-hydroxyvitamin D level:**  $\geq 20$  ng/ml

## What supplementation is right for me?

Even though there are good recommendations for daily intake of calcium and Vitamin D, you may still hear conflicting advice from well-meaning people on how much supplementation you need. Keep in mind that taking more of a "good thing" is not necessarily better: too much Vitamin D may have negative consequences, too. The key to choosing the right amount of supplementation is to check with your provider before starting any vitamin supplements or making dietary changes. Having a discussion with your provider about your bone health, diet choices and nutrient needs can help you make the right choices for better health.

# A Winning Team:

## *Your Healthcare Provider, Decision Making and You*

*Linda Frommer, MPH, Veteran and Family Centered Care Coordinator; Barry Rose, Veteran and Family Advisory Council Member; Erin Woodhead, PhD, Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Center (GRECC) Postdoctoral Fellow*

How involved do you want to be in a choosing medical treatment option for yourself? There are times when the right treatment is clear, but other times there may be more than one option. Your health care team can give you specific information about your condition and available treatments, clarify medical jargon, and explain the risks and benefits for each treatment option. You, however, are the expert about yourself. You know yourself and your feelings: what options make the most sense for you and your situation. Sharing important information about yourself, your expectations, your values, and your preferences are part of getting the care you want and need.

A well-informed patient and a well-informed provider make the best possible team!

### **Your Appointment is a Time to Share Information:**

- Write down your top concerns/questions before your appointment.
- Tell your health care team if you don't understand something.
- Bring a relative or friend to the appointment, if you wish.
- Ask for pamphlets or other information about your health issue.
- Speak frankly about your concerns.
- Share your preferences for treatment.

### **Sharing in Medical Decisions**

Sometimes, especially when dealing with a major illness, health care can feel complex and overwhelming. Make sure your health care team knows your concerns, fears, and questions, so that they can address your needs. Your health care team may suggest educational materials and tools to help you sort through your choices. For example, if you were trying to decide about prostate cancer treatment for a slow-growing cancer, you might want information about the risks, benefits and side effects for three potential choices: surgery, radiation therapy, or watchful waiting.

When there are multiple options for treatment, be sure all your questions are answered on the risks, benefits and side effects for each option:

Think about how you feel about each choice and the potential impact on your lifestyle.

### **Ask for resources and tools to help guide your decision.**

Helpful resources are listed in the box below. The Ottawa Personal Decision Guide is a tool based on research findings that highlights four steps to help patients work through their treatment options:

*Clarify the decision*—What decision are you facing? When do you need to make a choice? Are you leaning toward one option?

*Identify your decision making needs*—What support do you have? Do you have information on the various options? Are you clear about which benefits and risks matter the most to you?

*Explore your needs*—Who is involved in your care and what are their perspectives? Look at the benefits and risks and identify what matters to you.

*Plan the next steps based on your needs*—Identify what may make the decision difficult and what you might need to do to help you choose a course of action.

Remember, we are here for you---you are the most important member of your health care team!

# VA Palo Alto Health Care System Facilities

## **VA PALO ALTO DIVISION**

3801 Miranda Avenue  
Palo Alto, CA 94304  
(650) 493-5000

## **VA LIVERMORE DIVISION**

4951 Arroyo Road  
Livermore, CA 94550  
(925) 373-4700

## **VA MENLO PARK DIVISION**

795 Willow Road  
Menlo Park, CA 94025  
(650) 493-5000

## **VA CAPITOLA OPC**

1350 N. 41st Street,  
Suite 102  
Capitola, CA 95010  
(831) 464-5519

## **VA MODESTO OPC**

1524 McHenry Avenue,  
Suite 315  
Modesto, CA 95350  
(209) 557-6200

## **VA MONTEREY OPC**

3401 Engineer Lane  
Seaside, CA 93955  
(831) 883-3800

## **VA SAN JOSE OPC**

80 Great Oaks Boulevard  
San Jose, CA 95119  
(408) 363-3000

## **VA SONORA OPC**

19747 Greenley Road  
Sonora, CA 95370  
(209) 588-2600

## **VA STOCKTON OPC**

7777 Freedom Drive  
French Camp, CA 95231  
(209) 946-3400

## **World Wide Web Address:**

[www.paloalto.va.gov](http://www.paloalto.va.gov)

*Taking an active role in your care can help prevent medication errors! Carry your medication list with you at all times!*

## Tips for Healthy Living

- Be sensible. Enjoy the foods you eat, just don't overdo it.
- Stretch before bed to give you more energy when you wake.

[www.smallstep.gov](http://www.smallstep.gov)

## Questions or Comments?

If you have any questions or topics you would like addressed in *To Your Health* feel free to contact:

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*To Your Health* is published quarterly for VAPAHCS veterans and their families.

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