



The ELDERMET Lunchtime Seminar Series

In October and November 2009, the inaugural *Celebration of Positive Ageing* event took place at University College Cork. This event aimed to inform people about positive ageing, integrate older and younger populations to highlight the benefits for both and challenge negative perceptions of ageing and of older people.

As part of this event, the ELDERMET project hosted a seminar series that saw experts in the areas of Geriatric Medicine, Nutrition, Epidemiology, Physical Activity and Mental Health speak, with particular reference to older populations. From each of these seminars came a common thread; four building blocks that together support health ageing. *The Cornerstones of Positive Ageing* is a report of these seminars, outlining the benefits of **diet, physical activity, social networks** and the **avoidance of detrimental behaviours** in supporting health, not only in older populations but throughout life.

The rapidly ageing Irish population presents a number of challenges and opportunities for the Irish health service and other state bodies. Research is essential to enable appropriate and effective action on the health, social, medical, demographic and economic factors affecting future populations. ELDERMET is taking the first steps in providing the answers to fundamental questions on health and well-being, the reduction of disease and prevention of disability with increasing age.

For more information on any of the seminars, speakers or the ELDERMET project, please contact Dr Siobhán Cusack: eldermet@ucc.ie or 021 490 1754.

The Cornerstones of Positive Ageing

The world is getting older! Declining birth rates and increasing life expectancy mean that in 20 years, 1 in every 8 people on the planet will be older than 65 years! In less than 10 years, the number of people over 65 years will outnumber children (under 5 years) for the first time in history.

Older age can be a time of increased confidence, enjoyment and opportunity to share and apply the wisdom and experience gained throughout life.

However, without good health, older age can be a time marked by debilitation and morbidity (illness) that impacts severely on quality of life. Some aspects of ageing cannot be avoided, but there four cornerstones that are the foundation of health ageing.

Positive Youth for Positive Ageing
The cornerstones of positive ageing are the foundation of good health at any age, but particularly for those over 65 years.

Diet

Obesity

In Ireland, 8 out of 10 men, and 7 out of 10 women are overweight, as measured by the Body Mass Index (BMI - Table 1) which is the relationship between a person's height and weight. A third of Irish people are classed as obese, (BMI >30). Obesity is not just an Irish problem; levels are increasing worldwide, particularly in children. It's no shock to find that obesity is also prevalent in older populations.

In Ireland, 1 in every 5 Irish people over 65 years is classed as obese.

BMI (kg/m ²)	Weight category
Below 18.5	Underweight
18.5 – 24.9	Healthy
25.0 – 29.9	Overweight
30.0 – 34.9	Obese (Class I)
35.0 – 39.9	Obese (Class II)
Over 40	Obese (Class III)

Table 1: Body Mass Index *Source: Slán, 2007*

Causes of obesity

The rise in obesity in the last century has been linked to a change of diet and levels of physical activity. There has been a move away from traditional home-prepared food to more readily-available highly processed foods, generally higher in fat, salt and sugar. Modern life does not require high levels of physical activity and most people lead a relatively sedentary lifestyle.

Obesity and health

The impact of obesity on health is well known. Increased rates of diabetes, heart disease, stroke and issues such as low self esteem lead to a general reduction in quality of life for people who are obese (Table 2).

<i>Disease</i>	<i>Incidence and outcome in Ireland</i>
Cardiovascular disease	Primary cause of death in Ireland, accounting for ~10,000 (36%) of all deaths each year.
Stroke	Responsible for ~2,116 (7.5%) of all Irish deaths in 2008. Each year, ~10,000 people suffer stroke, with ~30,000 suffering residual disability following a stroke.
Cancer (colon, rectum, breast)	In 2008, breast and digestive organ cancers accounted for ~9% and ~28%, respectively, of all Irish deaths.
High blood pressure (hypertension)	Hypertension is the most common medical condition in Ireland, affecting ~1 in every 10 people. It accounted for >1% of all deaths in 2006 and is a risk factor for diseases such as cardiovascular disease and stroke.
Type 2 (late onset) diabetes	Diabetes mellitus accounted for ~2% of all deaths in 2006. It is a risk factor for stroke and cardiovascular disease.
Sleep apnoea / respiratory problems	Sleep apnoea, has been diagnosed in ~7,000 Irish people, but figures may be as high as 105,000. In 2008, respiratory disease accounted for ~12% of Irish deaths.
Osteoarthritis (knees, hips, lower back)	One in six Irish people suffers from arthritis. The most common form, osteoarthritis, is present in the majority of people over 55 years.

Table 2: The most common obesity-related diseases

Beat obesity with a healthy diet

The benefits of a balanced, healthy diet are well known but usually forgotten as our hand reaches for a tasty treat! Common sense tells us that we cannot suddenly deprive ourselves of something we are used to; in fact, we often crave most the very thing we know we should not have! **But** the benefits of changing from a diet high in fat, salt, sugar and processed foods are well worth the effort.

A healthy diet – the food pyramid

The components of a healthy diet are summed up by the food pyramid (Figure 1).

- ***Reduce*** highly processed food and drinks and those high in ***sugar, salt and fat***
- ***Increase*** cereals and ***breads*** (make them wholemeal!)
- ***Increase*** fruits and ***vegetables***
- Calcium from ***dairy products*** (even low fat!) is essential for healthy bones
- ***Protein*** can come from a wide range of sources, even for vegetarians
- Most importantly, drink enough ***water*** (at least 8 cups) every day

Changes in diet with age

Diet can change with age due to physical changes such as tooth loss, reduced muscle strength that makes chewing more difficult or biological changes that alter taste and smell. This can lead to a narrow, nutritionally imbalanced diet. Speak to your doctor to ensure that you are eating the full range of nutrients required to maintain good

health. The range of foods available today means that with a little adaptation, no meal need be boring or unhealthy!

Use the Food Pyramid to plan your healthy food choices every day and watch your portion size

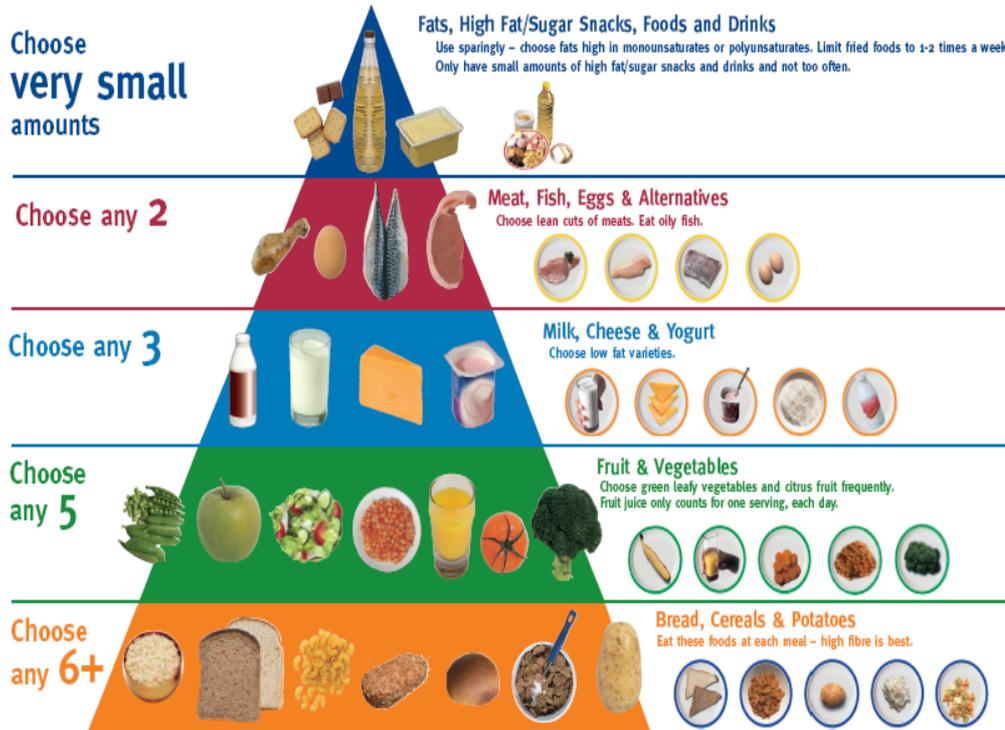


Figure 1: The Food Pyramid

Physical Activity

The average person today does far less under his or her own steam than in previous generations. Older age may mean a reduction in activity, but it rarely rules out activity altogether.



Physical activity has been shown to benefit both physical and mental health (Table 3). Exercise is recognised as a ‘self help’ tool which can improve mood, self esteem and the ability to deal with stress. Not only that, older people who exercise are much less likely to suffer from depression than those who don’t. Exercise is the only ‘self help’ aid in the treatment of depression.

Physical Activity	Target	Benefit
Reduces risk of:	Obesity	Exercise reduces excess fuel stored in the body, reducing the risk of obesity-related diseases, even in those with a high BMI
	Heart disease	Physical inactivity is a primary risk factor for coronary heart disease, the leading cause of death in Europe
	Diabetes	Moderate to vigorous physical activity reduces the risk of Type 2 (late onset) diabetes by 33 – 50%
	Cancer	Physical activity has been shown to have a protective effect against breast, colon / colorectal and lung cancers
Strengthens:	Muscles & bones	Stronger muscles improve posture and balance; stronger bones protect against osteoporosis, reduce pain and stiffness and improve mobility for those with osteoarthritis
	Posture & balance	Stronger posture and balance can result in fewer falls, greater independence and a better quality of life
Improves:	Mental health	Exercise can reduce the risk of depression (by up to 22%), dementia and Alzheimer's disease and improve planning, short-term memory and decision making. Even a single exercise session can reduce anxiety, improve reactivity to stress, quality and length of sleep, well-being and mood
	Self esteem	Physical activity can improve self perception such as body image, self worth and self esteem
	Energy levels	Physical activity invigorates, increases strength, stamina and overall fitness.

Table 3: The Benefits of Physical Activity

Source: www.eufic.org

How to be active?

Structured sports or exercise in the gym is not for everyone, but it is not difficult to incorporate exercise into everyday life. Simple lifestyle changes can provide you with the recommended total of 30 minutes of moderately intensive daily aerobic activity. Aerobic fitness simply means the ability to carry out continuous movement without getting tired; activities like walking, dancing, cycling or household chores like vacuuming, cleaning or mowing the lawn.

Fitness is a 'use it or loose it' condition, it must be maintained; the more you do, the more you will improve and benefit.

Age is no barrier to improving fitness. Find out what you like to do, do it with friends, enjoy it and you'll be surprised at how rewarding it can be. Start small; climb the stairs a couple of times or walk as if you are in a hurry for five minutes - build on this every day and you'll quickly see an improvement.

Fitness doesn't just make you feel better; it can also vastly improve your health. People who are moderately active, particularly in their middle and later years:

- are **twice as likely to avoid** early death and serious illness
- have **greater** overall **quality of life**



Get involved!

Get involved in physical activities in your area. Contact your local branch of *Go for Life*, the national programme for sports and physical activity for older people at: <http://olderinireland.ie/go-life/how-do-i-get-involved> **Important:** Remember to consult your GP or specialist clinician prior to undertaking any exercise regime.

Social Networking

We all know how invigorating time spent with friends can be. The good news is that spending time with friends and taking part in activities you enjoy - being social - benefits both physical and mental health.



Social networks and mental health

Depression is often seen in people who are socially isolated. Those with good social networks have lower levels of dementia, are less likely to neglect their well-being and more likely to have higher levels of self esteem and cognition. People with more social interaction have less than half the memory decline of those who are socially isolated. A diverse social network is best; those who have many social outlets have the best conditions for good mental health.

Social networks and physical health

Being social has other, less obvious, benefits to physical health. Participating in a broad range of activities uses a wide range of sensory, motor and cognitive functions, all of which are necessary for good health. While decline in muscle strength and motor function is common with increasing age, people who maintain social activities have better dexterity and range of movement and slow motor function decline.

Social networks in Ireland

Social networking is in decline in urban areas, in part due to increased high density housing serving a more ‘transient’ and mobile population and the loss of traditional city communities. Social networking is in decline in rural areas in part due to the lack of adequate transport networks and the loss of traditional family support structures as young people move to urban areas.



The good news is that older Irish people are becoming more involved in their communities, being proactive in organising and taking part in social events.

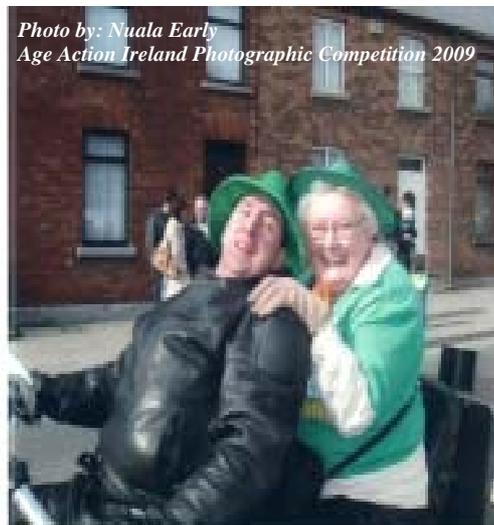
Social networks	Target	Benefit
Improved:	Cognition	Large social networks protect cognitive function
	Memory	People who are most socially active have less than half the rate of memory loss of those who were not. Memory loss increases the risk of dementia
Lower risk of:	Dementia	Social networks are protective against dementia
	Depression	Rates of depression are lowest in those who have a diverse social network. Depression can increase the risk of dementia, and cardiovascular disease
	Self neglect	Poor social networking is associated with self-neglect
Prevent loss of:	Motor abilities	Participation in social activities protects against rapid decline in motor function associated with ageing
	Muscle strength	Maintaining muscle strength can help protect against cognitive decline, depression, low mood and self esteem. It also decreases the risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease
	Speed and dexterity	Social activities that include goal-directed movement help to maintain dexterity, speed and fine motor skills that can help deter disability and dementia

Table 4: The Benefits of Social Networks

Be social!

Joining activity groups, community or church groups, adult education, charity organisations, sports, music, craft or reading groups – whatever you enjoy – is the easiest and most enjoyable way of supporting health at every stage of life.

Call (01-4756989) or visit Age Action Ireland at: www.ageaction.ie/links for information on activities and community groups in your area or see your local supermarket notice boards, community announcement leaflets (or local radio), libraries, churches, community centres...and get involved!



Avoid detrimental behaviour

Most people know they undertake some form of detrimental behaviour, but knowing what’s best for you and actually doing it don’t always go hand in hand! There are many simple measures that reduce the risk of illness and maintain health.

First – some good news!

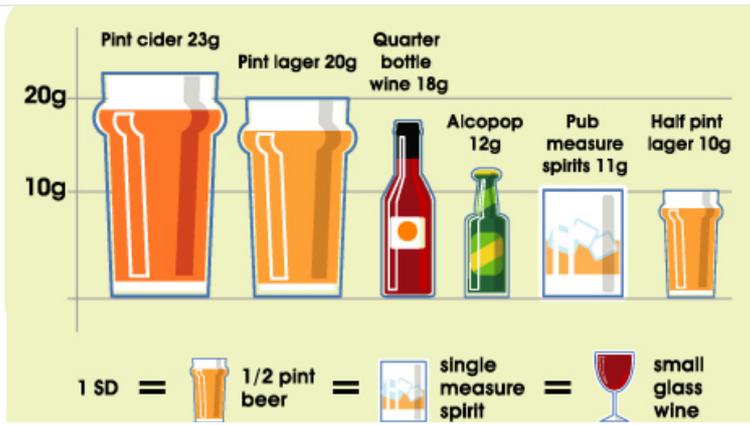
The good news is that not only are people in Ireland over 65 years the least likely to smoke and binge drink, these numbers have been falling consistently for the last 10 years. The health benefits associated with giving up smoking are well documented and the benefits of moderate drinking (Tables 5 and 6), though still being explored, are accepted.

Recommendations		
Men	Up to 21 standard drinks a week	Space drinks out over a week, not just into one session. Binge drinking, 6 or more standard drinks in one session, is harmful and increases the risk of accidents, injuries, violence and poisoning.
Women	Up to 14 standard drinks a week	

Table 5: Recommended alcohol intake levels

Source: Healthpromotion.ie

In Ireland, a standard drink contains about 10 grams of pure alcohol. It takes one hour for every standard drink to be processed by the body. Remember, measure drinks carefully; what you get in a pub and what is poured at home could be very different!

Standard drink measures		Type	Standard size
		Beer	Half pint
		Wine (12.5%)	Small glass (7 standard drinks per bottle)
		Spirits	Pub measure (35.5ml)
SD = Standard Drink		Alcopops	Bottle (275mls)

Source: Healthpromotion.ie

Table 6: Standard drink measures

Drugs

Drug-taking is usually associated with younger age groups but addiction to prescription drugs or taking drugs incorrectly can be very damaging. It is wise to be fully aware of what you are taking and why. Drugs may not agree with you – the side effects may be very harsh, or they may react with other drugs you are taking. Discussion with your doctor *and* your pharmacist will ensure that your drug regime is both appropriate and beneficial.



Organise your drug regime; use a pill box. Divide your medicines according to day, time, whether they have to be taken with water, food or alone and keep each day separate. A reminder, like a note on your fridge or an alarm on your phone is an easy way of ensuring nothing is forgotten.

Trips and falls

Many falls and injuries around the home are avoidable. Making rugs or mats safe by ensuring they have non-slip backing and that the edges do not curl up reduces the risk of tripping or slipping. Installing hand rails on steps and stairs or in showers, along with non-slip mats and seats, wearing sensible footwear for the conditions (no 6 inch stiletto heels!), ensuring that clothing isn't too long and that dressing gown cords or belts don't trail on the ground, all help to reduce the risk of injury.

Illness

People often forget to keep warm in cold weather. Wrap up in extra layers (not just one heavy layer), keep active by moving about the house and ask a family member or neighbour to deliver a stock of non-perishable food items and to prepare a store of solid fuel if necessary during the winter months. All year round, but particularly in warmer weather, remember to drink enough water and stay hydrated. Dehydration will severely reduce well-being and can be very dangerous. Keep in touch with family and friends so that help is never far away if you need it.

Adaptation – The Key to Successful Ageing

There is no way to go through life without experiencing some of the more difficult aspects, be it bereavement, job loss, illness, accident or other sources of unhappiness due to life's trials and tribulations. After such events, adapting abilities, capabilities, energy levels and interest to whatever new circumstances have arisen has been found to be the key to successful ageing.

A level of decline and limitation is expected with age; successful ageing is measured by the attitude to and integration of such limitations. Those who adapt well, who integrate change appropriate to their situation, age successfully.

The four cornerstones are the foundation on which positive ageing is based. Studies have found that social networking is the most important factor for well-being and successful ageing. Social networking can only occur where there is good diet, physical activity and little or no detrimental behaviour supporting the ability to get out there and meet people. Speak to your family, friends, clinician, local community groups, get out there and give yourself the very best chance to maintain health – it's never too late to start!