



Healthy aging and the food we eat

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GUELPH — An aging population offers both opportunity and responsibility to those in the food industry, including government, researchers, food producers, packagers and farmers.

"The good news is we're living longer," said George Zegarac, deputy minister of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. "The bad news is we're living longer. From a health promotion standpoint, we have to get ahead of the curve."

Zegarac was one of several speakers at a conference Wednesday that brought together people in the food industry to look at the dietary needs of the elderly and ways the food industry can adapt to help people live in their own homes and age while remaining healthy.

The event at the Cutten Club was organized by the Guelph Food Technology Centre, FANbase, and Agri-food for Healthy Aging.

Dr. Heather Keller, a research scientist at the University of Guelph, said while there's lots of research about other aspects of aging, and obviously nutrition factors into that, little is known about their existing eating habits.

"There's a lack of information about what's eaten, what's needed, the benefits of food intervention and drug-food interactions," Keller said. "There's also a lack of government policy around food and aging."

Seniors who live independently often have trouble getting to the grocery store, pushing big grocery carts and navigating big grocery stores. Food labels are hard to read with aging eyes and packaging can be difficult to open.

"There's a high need for functional food," she said. "This is the new market."

Alison Duncan, also of the U of G, agreed.

"Omega-3 fatty acids are known to improve brain function. This can link back to the farmer," Duncan said. "Lutein is a plant pigment known to improve eye health."

She said with age comes declining muscle mass but a key to combating that is protein. She's been experimenting with adding soy protein to bread, which is easy for a senior to eat.

"We can manipulate crops and the way they are harvested. We need to make food easier to eat," she said.

Jill Estioko is director of food and hospitality for RBJ Schlegel Holdings Inc., which owns a chain of long-term care homes. She said it's a challenge to feed residents three meals and two snacks each day on the \$7.31 per day, per person amount the Ministry of Health funds these facilities.

Some residents have trouble chewing and swallowing, so food is often pureed. But food loses nutrition and fibre when pureed. It's often unappealing in that state too, she said.

The need is for high fibre, low sodium and reduced trans fats foods, said Ken Stark, a professor at the University of Waterloo.

"And if you can find a puree that tastes great, that would be good too."

Keller cautioned food producers to bear in mind that with a goal of keeping seniors in their own homes, "you can't just develop products for long-term care. More seniors are living in their homes. They need products too."

Facts about aging and eating that came out of the conference:

- In 2006 there were 4.3 million seniors in Canada (over 65). By 2026 there will be 8 million seniors.
- 22 per cent of seniors in long-term care are immigrants, with different dietary needs.
- 40 per cent are overweight.
- 27 per cent live with chronic pain that causes difficulty opening packages and cans.
- 51 per cent live home alone.
- Seniors often have difficulty chewing, cooking and shopping.
- 30 per cent of seniors in long-term care need modified texture food (soft or pureed).
- Long-term care facilities have a budget of \$7.31 per day per resident for food.
- Favourite foods are hot cereal, soups, eggs, and mashed potatoes.

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