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The Graying of America

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One of the biggest and most important demographic changes facing the United States is the aging of our population. Both the number and proportion of older people are increasing. In 2000, 35 million Americans were age 65 and older, representing 12.4 percent of the total population. The older population is expected to reach 54 million in 2020 and more than double by 2050, accounting for 20 percent of our population.

The graying of America may have wide-ranging implications for the food industry if future spending patterns of the elderly follow those of today's older age group. Researchers with USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) examined at-home food expenditure data and found that households headed by individuals age 65-74 spent more on cereal and cereal products, dairy products, poultry, and processed vegetables than other age groups, while households headed by individuals age 75 and older spent more on fruit and nonalcoholic beverages. The elderly generally spend less eating out. Away-from-home food expenditures for those age 75 and older were 30 percent lower than the average of all households and 23 percent lower than those age 65-74.

Older Americans today are living longer, are better educated, and are more prosperous than previous generations. But, disparities among the older population continue to exist between men and women, racial and ethnic groups, and income classes.

Analysis by ERS shows that 94 percent of households with an elderly person in 2000 were food secure—access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. Eighty-eight percent of U.S. households with no elderly persons present were food secure in 2000. When faced with limited money or resources for food, some elderly households turn to Federal and community food assistance programs. An average of 1.7 million Americans age 60 and older received food stamps each month in 2000. However, only about a third of older people who are eligible participate in the program. USDA and some States have begun testing Food Stamp Program changes designed to increase participation by eligible older people.

Two areas of caution for the elderly in the new century include changing nutrition needs and complications from foodborne illnesses. As people age, their energy needs decline. Thus, older individuals need to make wise food choices, selecting nutrient-dense foods and limiting "extras." ERS analyses of USDA food consumption survey data show that most older Americans are having trouble fitting the recommended number of daily food group servings into their decreased "calorie budgets," especially older women. For example, only 6 percent of older men and 3 percent of older women consumed the recommended number of servings from the milk, yogurt, and cheese group, compared with 26 percent of younger men and 15 percent of younger women.

While older adults have lower rates of foodborne illness infections than most other age groups, they are more likely to have some of the more severe complications. Older people, and those who prepare their food, must continue to be vigilant about safe food practices. In the coming years, the elderly as a share of the U.S. population will reach the highest level in history. How we act to prevent foodborne illness, ensure adequate nutrient intakes, and meet other health and support needs for this group will be important issues not only for older Americans but also for the Nation.

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