



Global Coalition on Aging and Nutricia Call to Action:

Fighting Ageism to Empower Older Persons to Age in Good Health



A Brief Overview

The World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations (UN) have declared 2021-2030 the Decade of Healthy Ageing to address the fundamental goal of redefining health in terms of “the functional ability that enables older people to be, and to do, what they have reason to value.” This objective should characterize today’s world in which longer lives and a simultaneous decline in birth rates results in more older people in society than young—for the first time in human history.

To achieve individual and societal goals of aging well and in good health, it will be profoundly important to overcome the false, ageist assumptions that a range of debilitating, costly conditions are an inevitable part of aging. This harmful ageist misperception is too often embedded across society, in the health system itself, and even in our self-perceptions.

“As older adults in our 60s, 70s, 80s or 90s, when we experience conditions such as being tired, trouble walking, becoming frail, losing vision, why are these not seen as indicators of disease—for example, heart failure, osteoporosis, presbyopia (loss of ability to focus on close objects)—that can be overcome, managed or even cured, rather than the ageist acceptance of just part of growing old?”

Michael W Hodin, CEO Global Coalition on Aging to the Asia Development Bank Conference on Aging, November 22, 2021



The World Health Organization (WHO) defines healthy aging in terms of “the functional ability that enables older people to be, and to do, what they have reason to value.” According to the WHO, this shift toward an emphasis on functional ability “will require fundamental changes in the clinical focus on care for older people, as well as the way care, is organized, funded, and delivered across health and social sectors.” Among these fundamental changes is a new focus on identifying and mitigating age-related conditions that affect people in advancing years. This means focusing not

only on non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and Alzheimer’s disease, but also on the conditions that increase in prevalence with age, such as declining vision and hearing, cognitive decline, a weakened immune system, deteriorating skin health, and weakening bone density and muscle mass, all of which hinder the ability to age in good health.

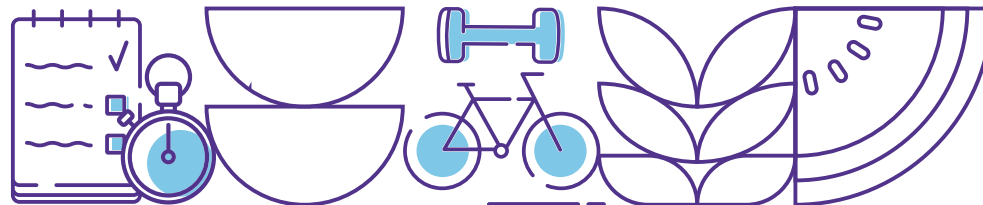
The Platform for Change

The culture of ageism is often unconscious yet systemic, and it has subtle and genuine consequences as it profoundly deters older people from taking control of their health. We do not always realize that we are being ageist, as we might not recognize the thoughts, feelings, and actions triggered by age stereotypes. Combatting ageism and challenging preset notions of what it means to be old also means challenging the idea that certain limitations come with aging and are, therefore, inevitable.

As one of the least recognized but most impactful social determinants of health, it is revealing that the UN and WHO are targeting ageism first and above all else in the Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030).

In the 2021 [Global Report on Ageism](#), the World Health Organization (WHO) found [ageism] affects billions of people globally and is a damaging human rights issue and public health problem:

- One in two people globally hold moderately or highly ageist attitudes
- In Europe, one in three older people report having been a target of ageism
- Healthcare rationing by age is widespread, leading to withheld therapies (such as ventilators, surgeries, and dialysis), with rationing increasing with every decade of age.



Ageism, nutrition, and the conditions of aging

The loss of weight and muscle mass and subsequent loss of mobility and independence are often considered normal parts of aging. We do not recognize how ageism has led us to accept certain conditions of aging—such as malnutrition—as a normal part of aging.

As stated by Sarah Booth, Director of the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University: “Poor nutrition is implicated in osteoporosis, heart disease, frailty, and age-related macular degeneration. Our work focuses on empowering older people to take control of their health...that includes the path to adequate nutrition.”

Nutrition is a powerful tool in addressing some of these conditions of aging and can help to empower all of us to take control of our own aging journeys. Through the food we eat, each of us can influence our health and aging trajectories. Nutrition and empowering people to take nutrition decisions and actions is one of the ways we can break with ageist attitudes to health in older age.

When this approach is scaled globally, nutrition becomes a valued and powerful tool to ensure good health, enhance productivity, and lead to fiscal sustainability in an era of longevity. Therefore, it should be no surprise that nutrition’s role in meeting the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing goals has already been clearly established in the principal framework outlined in the Decade’s [Baseline Report](#). Nutrition is specifically cited as one of a select few levers to enable “...a billion more people enjoying better health and well-being.”

“An ageist attitude to age-related conditions stands in the way of proactively managing them, which in turn generates an escalating health, social and economic burden in a world of more old than young. Ensuring a varied and balanced food intake with sufficient protein and micro-nutrients to meet the needs of older people can help maintain function and speed up recovery when health is challenged.”

Patrick Kamphuis, Senior Director Medical Affairs and Health Innovation, Nutricia

Furthermore, this is aligned with the targeted emphasis on nutrition in the WHO Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health and in the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

The Global Coalition on Aging and Nutrition put forward this **Call to Action** to break preconceived, ageist notions of what it means to grow older and promote investment in nutrition as part of integrated care systems to enable people to age in good health. We believe the following actions will enable a more positive and inclusive outlook on growing old in good health:

“Aging exhausts our reserves, which can make us more vulnerable to health conditions or traumatic health events like a fall. Nutrition is a key element in building and maintaining reserves, and can both play a role in overall health and have an impact on our recovery.”

Professor Juergen M Bauer, MD, Ph.D., Center of Geriatric Medicine
Heidelberg University, Germany



1.

All actors that seek to serve and support older people should work together to overcome the cultural barriers of ageism and its impact on (1) our perspective of growing old and (2) how that influences how each of us believes we can impact our health as we age.

“Changing how we think, feel, and act towards age and ageing as a prerequisite for successful action on healthy ageing and for progress on the three other action areas of the Decade of Healthy Ageing,”

The Lancet, *Ageism: a social determinant of health that has come of age*, March 17, 2021

“[Older people] who internalize the ageist attitude they may encounter are also less likely to seek medical care or engage in preventive behaviors like eating healthily and exercising.”

Dr. Ross Colt, Family Medical Practice, Graduate Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College

2.

Care must become more person-centered, recognizing that every person is different—with individual needs and aspirations—no matter their age. We should acknowledge and act on the central element that each older person is different; there are gaps in health and intrinsic capacity and widely varying needs as we age, which can be powerfully addressed through better nutrition.

“The most important thing I ever learned about aging is the vast diversity of circumstances and health status. The cumulative consequences of life’s experiences, behaviors and inequities become manifest in older age. This is why person-centered care, including the prevention and well-being strategies around nutrition are so central.”

Dr. John Beard, former Director of Ageing and Life Course, WHO and leader of the WHO Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health team

“Nutrition is an important modulator of health and well-being in older persons. Inadequate nutrition contributes to the progression of many diseases.”

European Society for Clinical Nutrition and Metabolism Guidelines on Clinical Nutrition and Hydration in Geriatrics

3.

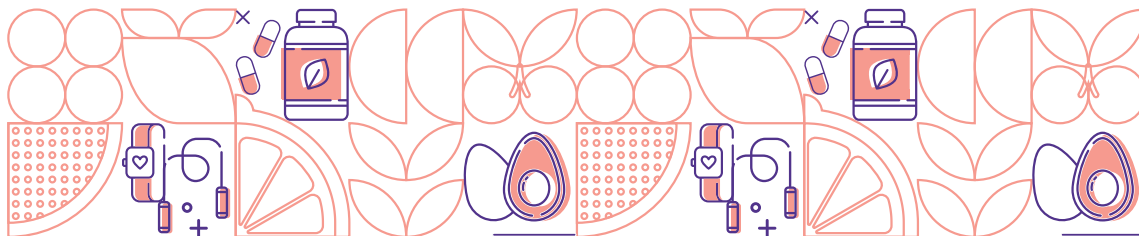
Promote systems-wide reforms to include nutrition as part of integrated healthcare provision, improving health for all as we age while enabling fiscal sustainability at the health systems level.

“Loss of muscle mass and strength, reduced flexibility, and problems with balance can all impair mobility. Nutritional status can also be affected negatively by physiological changes that can accompany ageing, in turn with an impact on vitality and mobility. Interventions that improve nutrition and encourage physical exercise, when integrated into care plans and delivered together, can slow, stop or reverse declines in intrinsic capacity.”

World Health Organization Integrated Care for Older People (ICOPE) Guidelines on Community-Level Interventions to Manage Declines in Intrinsic Capacity

“Malnutrition and undernutrition affect over 30 million European citizens and place an unacceptable burden on European citizens and health care budgets. Ample scientific evidence shows that optimizing nutritional care is a very (cost-) effective measure in both disease prevention and treatment.”

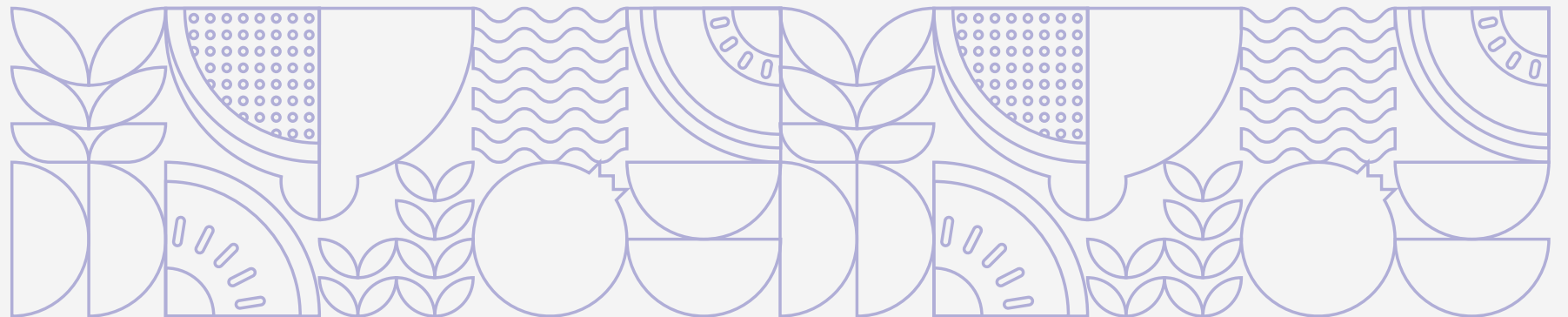
Olle Ljungqvist (Professor of Surgery, Nutrition & Metabolism, Örebro University, Sweden) and Frank de Man (Executive Director of the European Nutrition for Health Alliance) in Euractiv, Oct 12, 2020



In Summary

Fighting ageism, recognizing that certain conditions are not an inevitable part of aging, and ensuring people receive care centered on their individual needs is crucial for empowering older people—in fact, all people—to age in good health. Nutrition is one of the levers to address some of these conditions and can contribute to enabling us all to live life to the fullest as we age.

That is why we believe nutrition should be embraced across all ages as one of the principal actions of the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing.



About GCOA

GCOA represents a cross-section of global business including technology, pharmaceuticals, healthcare, home care, financial, transportation, and consumer sectors. We engage global institutions, policymakers, and the public to drive debate on, create, and promote innovative policies and actions to transform challenges associated with the ageing of the global population into opportunities for social engagement, productivity and fiscal sustainability.

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About Nutricia

Building on 125 years of research, innovation and care, Nutricia pioneers nutrition that helps enable life-changing and life-saving health outcomes, so that people can live their life to its fullest.

Nutricia supports healthy growth and development in early life and plays its part addressing some of the world's biggest health challenges from birth through to old age. The Nutricia portfolio includes a wide range of nutritional solutions for pre-term birth, faltering growth, food allergy, rare metabolic diseases, age-related conditions and chronic disease, such as frailty, cancer, stroke and early Alzheimer's disease.

As part of Danone, Nutricia embraces the company's long-standing mission of bringing health through food to as many people as possible and its aim to inspire healthier and more sustainable eating and drinking practices while committing to achieve measurable nutritional, social, societal and environment impact.

For more information, visit www.nutricia.com

