

Good nutrition in later life

Everyone needs a healthy diet to keep up their energy level, reduce the risk of chronic diseases and fight infections, whatever their age. However, many older people do not have a healthy diet. These guidelines, aimed at programme managers and people working with older people, discuss older people's nutritional needs, why they may not be eating well, and what can be done to help.

Many older people become malnourished because their food intake does not give them the energy or nutrients they need. Being malnourished makes a person weak, tired and more at risk of developing infections. It also leads to muscle wasting, poor wound healing, skin problems, memory loss and confusion, and breathing and heart difficulties.

Malnutrition commonly occurs when someone does not eat enough, or when their diet is unbalanced. A person who is obese may be malnourished, because the food they eat does not contain enough nutrients.

What is a healthy diet?

A healthy diet contains enough energy and a balance of food from the following groups:

- Fruit and vegetables contain minerals, fibre, and antioxidant vitamins, which help the body work efficiently and support the immune system. Five portions of fruit and vegetables a day are recommended.
- Starchy foods such as cereals, potatoes, bread and maize should make up one-third of a person's diet. They are a good source of energy, calcium, iron and B vitamins.
- Dairy products such as milk, yogurt and cheese are good sources of protein and also of calcium, which helps to keep the bones strong.
- Meat, fish, eggs, pulses, nuts and beans are good sources of protein, which helps the body stay strong and fight off disease.
- Fatty foods (such as butter and oil) and sugary foods (such biscuits and jam) are good sources of energy, but should be kept to a minimum to reduce the risk of chronic diseases, obesity and tooth decay. Salt should be eaten only in small quantities.
- **Water** or other fluids are also essential.

Exercise and physical activities should accompany a balanced diet. Aerobic exercise (where the person gets moderately out of breath) is recommended for preventing and treating many chronic diseases, including non-insulin-dependent diabetes, hypertension (high blood pressure), heart disease and osteoporosis (thinning of the bones).

What do older people need?

Older people, like everyone else, need energy and a balanced diet. They should limit (but not cancel) their consumption of fats, sugar and salt. The digestive process slows down with age, so older people need smaller, more frequent meals than younger people. Five or six small, non-fatty meals a day are better than one or two big meals.

Case study: Kyrgyzstan

In Osh, Kyrgyzstan, the traditional harvest-time activity of preserving food for the winter was disrupted after communal violence broke out in the summer of 2010. Luch Lotosa, a local community organisation, arranged for groups of volunteers to prepare, cook and bottle fruit and vegetables, which they distributed to 500 vulnerable older people. The project not only provided food but also brought people from different ethnic groups and generations together.

Case study: South Africa

Muthande Society for the Aged (MUSA) supports older people and their families by distributing high-protein porridge and running drop-in centres offering a daily, well-balanced meal. MUSA also runs nutrition education and gardening projects for older people, with tools and seeds provided by the local municipality.

Case study: Mozambique

In Mozambique, HelpAge International provides older people at risk of malnutrition with supplementary food, help with preparing meals and training in nutrition. It also provides equipment for ploughing and growing food crops, and runs horticulture projects and a goat loan scheme.

Tip: Keep up protein and calcium intake

Older people's protein intake often drops because they cannot afford red meat, or because they find it hard to chew or digest.

Sometimes older people avoid dairy products because they think they cause digestive problems, or they avoid drinking because they are worried about going to the toilet.

Encourage older people keep up their protein and calcium intake.

Protein is important at this stage of life for sustaining a healthy immune system and preventing muscle wasting. Older people should eat high-quality protein such as egg white, lean meat, poultry and fish. Soy products (such as tofu), beans, lentils and nuts are key protein sources for vegetarians. Two portions of protein foods a day are recommended.

Fibre and water help to prevent constipation. Fibre is found in whole grains such as brown bread, whole cereals and brown rice, as well as fruit and vegetables. Older people sometimes lose the ability to feel thirsty and can become dehydrated, especially in warm climates. They should be encouraged to drink 1-1.5 litres of water or other fluids (such as soups or fruit juices) every day.

Micronutrients (minerals and vitamins) are important to protect the immune system and reduce the risk of chronic disease. Key micronutrients are:

- **Calcium** (from milk, yogurt, cheese and green leafy vegetables) is essential to maintain good bone health. It is recommended that older people eat at least three portions of dairy foods every day (four to five portions after the age of 75).
- **Vitamin D** helps to absorb calcium. The main natural source is sunlight, but it is also found in eggs, milk and oily fish (such as sardines, salmon, herring and mackerel).
- **Iron** is important for general health, as it is used by the body to make red blood cells. Sources include red meat, liver, beans and lentils.
- **Vitamin C** helps to repair the body and absorb iron. It is found in fruit and vegetables, especially citrus fruit and green vegetables.
- **Other vitamins and minerals** are important, such as vitamin A for vision, B-complex vitamins, vitamin K, magnesium, zinc and iodine.

It is important that older people and their carers know what foods contain these micronutrients, so that even if a person is eating less, they are getting the micronutrients they need. If the diet is balanced and the person is healthy, there will be no deficiency.

Special diets

Many older people have chronic conditions such as hypertension (high blood pressure), cardiovascular disease (disease of the heart or blood vessels), diabetes, anaemia (iron deficiency), arthritis, chronic liver disease or kidney disease, which require special diets.

For example, someone with diabetes should have a low-fat, low-sugar, low-salt diet that includes plenty of vegetables and starchy foods; someone with heart disease needs a low-fat, low-salt, high-fibre diet; someone with high blood pressure needs a low-salt diet; and a low-calorie diet is needed for weight reduction.

Anyone with a health condition should receive professional advice and regular check-ups.

Why do older people often have poor diets?

There are a number of reasons why older people may not eat well.

- **Physical reasons** The person may have difficulty buying or preparing food because they are too frail, unwell or depressed, because they have memory problems, or because they are disabled, for example, following a stroke. They may not be eating enough because they do not

Tip: Make changes gradually

Making big changes to one's diet can be difficult. It is often easier to make changes a little at a time.

Tip: Include nutrition education

Make sure income-generation or food-production projects include nutrition education, so that older people and their families understand why older people need a balanced diet and what this consists of.

Case study: Ethiopia

In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, CBISDO provides a nutritious meal six days a week to nearly 200 older men and women at its day-care centre and organises a "food-on-foot" programme through which older people deliver food to those who cannot come to the centre.

feel hungry, or because of a medical or dental condition, or the side-effects of medication. They may not be drinking enough because they do not feel thirsty, or because it is too much effort to pour a glass of water.

- **Economic reasons** Food may be unavailable or the person may be unable to afford it. They may have no access to farmland or not enough time or strength to farm. They may be unable to afford treatment for a medical or dental condition. They may buy food that is cheaper but more difficult to prepare or less appetising, so they eat less of it. If food is scarce, an older person may give their share to younger family members.
- **Social and educational reasons** Older people and their families may not know what foods older people need or how to prepare them. They may choose foods that are easy to cook but nutritionally poor. Bereavement or a change of living situation can affect how someone eats. For example, someone whose partner has died may not make the effort to eat well because they no longer have someone to cook for or eat with. Someone who has moved into a care home may find the mealtimes or menus do not suit them. Cultural beliefs may play a role too, limiting what a person is willing to try or what their family will offer them. In some cases, an older person may not be eating enough because their family is not sharing food with them.

What can be done to help?

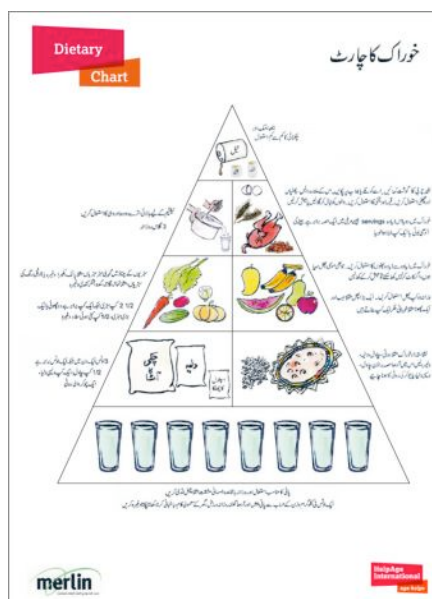
If you think that an older person is malnourished, try to arrange for them to see a nutritionist. Signs to look for include weight loss, muscle weakness, tiredness and increased vulnerability to infection.

If a nutritionist is not available, assess whether the person has a balanced diet. This means asking them what foods they eat, seeing which food groups these come into and seeing whether their diet includes foods from all the main groups. If it does not, discuss the reasons why and agree with the person what action to take. For example:

- **Improve the diet** Suggest changes to the person's diet to make it more balanced. Find out which locally available foods are good sources of different nutrients, particularly protein-rich foods that are affordable and easy to chew and digest. If possible, consult a nutritionist.
- **Make eating easier** Arrange for the person to have a health check-up, including dental and eyesight tests, to see if their physical condition is making it hard for them to eat. If they have difficulty handling equipment, make adaptations. The person may also need help with opening packages and preparing food. If they are not cooking for themselves, make sure the portions are not too large and that food is cut up if necessary. If they have missing teeth or sore gums, give them soft foods, or grind up hard foods such as nuts or dried fruit.
- **Improve access to food** If the person has difficulty obtaining or paying for food, it might be helpful to set up an income-generation or food-production project. Another option is to encourage people in the local community to cultivate older people's gardens for them, and to help with shopping, cooking and collecting fuel and water.
- **Reduce social barriers** If the person is not eating because they feel lonely, encourage them to eat with other people, for example, at a lunch club. Serve food hot and use spices and herbs to improve the flavour for people who are losing their sense of smell. Encourage the person to take some exercise to improve their appetite.

It is also helpful to raise awareness in the wider community of older people's nutritional needs. Also, remind people that older people often have a great deal of knowledge about local produce, dishes and culinary customs, and encourage older people to share their knowledge.

Posters, such as this one from HelpAge International and Merlin in Pakistan, help raise awareness of older people's nutritional needs.



Key points

- Older people, like everyone else, need a balanced diet to stay healthy and active.
- Older people have particular nutritional needs.
- There are many reasons why older people may not be eating well. Once these are identified, there are ways to help improve their diet.

Find out more

Ageways 76: Food and nutrition

Looks at why older people go hungry and suggests ways to tackle these problems, including in emergencies.

HelpAge International, London, 2011

www.helpage.org/resources/helpage-newsletters

Keep fit for life: Meeting the nutritional needs of older persons

Provides recommendations on nutrient intakes and physical activity.

World Health Organization and Tufts University School of Nutrition and Policy, 2002

<http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/9241562102.pdf>

The basics of nutrition

Describes how to meet the nutritional requirements of people of different ages.

Technical and Research Department, Module 1, Action Contre la Faim, France, 2007

www.actioncontrelafaim.org/fileadmin/contribution/8_publications/pdf/Ouvrages_et_fascicules_techniques/Nutrition/Version_1_Module_the_basics_of_nutrition__2007.pdf

Healthy eating

Section of Age UK website on food and nutrition.

www.ageuk.org.uk/health-wellbeing/healthy-eating-landing

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