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Preventing Malnutrition in Older Adults

What is malnutrition?

Malnutrition is when your body doesn't get enough nutrients from the foods you eat to work properly. Nutrients include fats, carbohydrates, protein, vitamins and minerals. These substances give your body energy. They help your body grow, repair tissues and regulate processes such as breathing and the beating of your heart.

In the United States, it is estimated that 3.7 million older adults are malnourished. Good nutrition is very important for all older adults. It is especially important for older adults who are ill or have been diagnosed with a chronic disease or dementia.

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What problems does malnutrition cause?

Malnutrition in older adults can lead to a number of health problems, including the following:

- Unintentional weight loss
- Tiredness and fatigue (feeling out of energy)
- Muscle weakness or loss of strength
- Depression
- Poor memory
- Weak immune system (higher risk for infection)
- [Anemia](#)

Because of these health problems, malnourished adults have a greater risk of falls. They also tend to make more visits to their doctor, the emergency room and the hospital. They don't recover from surgery or other procedures as quickly as adults who are well nourished.

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What causes malnutrition in older adults?

Malnutrition occurs when a person doesn't have enough food or doesn't eat enough healthy foods. A number of things may affect the amount and type of food that older adults eat. These include the following:

- **Health problems:** Older adults may have health problems that cause a loss of appetite or make it hard to eat. They may be on restricted diets that make foods taste bland. They may also have dental problems that make it hard to chew or swallow foods.
- **Medicines:** Certain medicines can decrease appetite or affect the taste and smell of food.
- **Low income:** Older adults may have trouble paying for groceries.

- **Disability:** Older adults who have dementia or physical disabilities may not be able to shop for groceries or cook for themselves.
- **Alcoholism** can decrease appetite and affect how the body absorbs nutrients from food.
- **Depression** in older adults can lead to loss of appetite.

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I'm caring for an older adult. How do I know if my loved one is malnourished?

It can be hard to tell if an older adult is malnourished. Check the refrigerator and pantry to find out the amount and type of food your loved one has on hand. Be sure to visit during mealtimes so you can observe his or her eating habits. Keep your loved one's doctor informed about what you observe. Ask the doctor about your loved one's risk of nutrition problems, and keep an eye out for the health problems listed above. Know which medicines your loved one takes, and ask a doctor or pharmacist if any of the medicines may cause loss of appetite. If your loved one is depressed or is an alcoholic, help him or her seek treatment.

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What do I do if I'm caring for a loved one who is malnourished?

If you suspect that your loved one has a medical condition that is causing malnutrition, help him or her seek treatment.

To improve your loved one's nutrition, try some of the following:

- **Encourage healthier food choices.** The best foods are those that are full of nutrients, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean meats. Help your loved one limit his or her intake of solid fats, sugars, alcoholic beverages and salt. Suggest [ways](#) to replace less healthy foods with healthier choices.
- **Snacking** on healthy foods is a good way to get extra nutrients and calories between meals. It may be especially helpful for older adults who quickly get full at mealtimes.
- **Make food taste good again.** If your loved one is on a restricted diet, herbs and spices can help restore flavor to bland foods. Just remember to avoid herb or spice blends that are heavy in salt.
- **Consider adding supplements to your loved one's diet.** If dietary changes aren't providing your loved one with enough nutrients, he or she may benefit from a supplement shake or other nutritional supplements. Talk to your loved one's doctor about these options.
- **Encourage exercise.** Even a little bit of exercise can help improve your loved one's appetite and keep his or her bones and muscles strong.
- **Plan social activities.** Make mealtimes and exercise a social activity. Take your loved one on a walk around the block. Encourage him or her to meet a neighbor or friend for lunch. Many restaurants offer discounts for seniors.
- **Ask for help.** If you have questions or need help, your loved one's doctor is a good resource. The doctor can talk to you about your loved one's risk for malnutrition and his or her medicines. You can also get information on community resources, such as Meals on Wheels, and other organizations that can help you care for your loved one.

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