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COMMUNITY EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Maintaining a Healthy Diet & Avoiding Malnutrition for Seniors

As older adults age, their nutritional needs change, and eating a balanced diet to accommodate these changes can help them maintain good health and reduce the risks of developing or worsening existing chronic conditions. Healthy eating habits can also support their mental health and cognitive function, providing them with the energy and mental clarity they need.

As important as diet is for older adults, many are malnourished, mainly due to a lack of proper meal planning or additional support at home. Here are some practical insights and tips to help them adopt better eating habits and experience the many long-term benefits of a nutritious, well-balanced diet.

Signs of Malnutrition in Your Aging Loved One

Aging adults often struggle physically to prep and cook healthy meals throughout the week as simple tasks like carrying groceries from the car to the house or cleaning dishes after meals can prove too burdensome. Additional challenges can include the inability to fully taste or digest foods, remembering the location of cooking utensils or ingredients and even forgetting to eat. As a result, many opt for a quicker, more convenient solution which is typically unhealthy, processed foods. It's why an estimated 50% of all older adults in the United States are malnourished.¹

Keep a watchful eye for the following signs of malnourishment in your aging loved one:

- Weakness of muscle and consistent fatigue
- Skin and hair drying out and nails becoming brittle
- Unintentional weight loss or weight gain
- Weakened immune system and increased susceptibility to infections
- Sudden-changing mood swings and irritability
- Difficulty focusing on the task at hand
- Wounds such as cuts or bruises taking noticeably longer to heal
- Feeling cold often
- Sunken cheeks and facial features
- Persistent diarrhea or long-term constipation

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Tips for Adopting a Healthier Diet

Develop a routine

Being more intentional with the foods you eat starts with being more intentional with when and how often you eat. Eating at the same times each day allows your loved one or their caretaker to prepare meals more effectively and not skip meals or substitute with unhealthy snacks.

Focus on fiber

Fiber-rich foods will keep them satiated longer, and are packed with nutrients. Opting for lentils, leafy greens and whole grains versus processed carbohydrates or enriched white bread will also help them avoid constipation.²

Avoid processed foods and fast food

As we age, our number of taste buds decrease, making processed foods heavy in fat, salt and sugar that much more enticing, especially in its most convenient form—fast food.³ However, these foods, especially when consumed regularly, can cause numerous adverse health effects and severe chronic conditions, including high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and more.

Modifying portions

Our metabolism slows down over time, so it's important to adjust our portions accordingly. Eating slowly can allow your loved one to not only enjoy their food more but be more accurate in gauging when they're full. If you notice they're gaining or losing weight quickly, consult their doctor for a better understanding of the amount of food appropriate for them to consume.

Incorporate a veggie in each meal

It's likely easier and more enjoyable to eat a veggie or two each meal instead of consuming a large salad each day they may not enjoy. They can enjoy eating the foods they love and perhaps even more with the added fiber and texture of vegetables in the mix.

Choose a light dinner

For many seniors, eating a heavy meal at night, especially one high in carbohydrates, can result in interrupted sleep and an upset stomach. Reserving heavier meals for earlier in the day and choosing a lighter meal, such as soup or salad at dinnertime, can improve the quality of their sleep.

Limiting alcohol consumption

While this tip is helpful for any age, it is especially applicable to seniors. Our metabolism slows down as we get older, lowering our tolerance and increasing the risk of falls due to impairment. For seniors taking multiple prescriptions and various medications, alcohol can interfere with and negatively affect results.

Drink plenty of water

Our bodies conserve less water over time, increasing the risk of dehydration and the numerous negative results that come from it.⁴ A good rule of thumb is to drink a third of their weight in ounces each day and add more water-rich foods to their diet, like watermelon, celery and broccoli.

Our caregivers can keep their pantry and refrigerator up-to-date, fix tasty, nutritious meals and snacks and provide other areas of support as needed to help promote a happier, healthier life at home.

Sources: 1. Combatting Senior Malnutrition | ACL Administration for Community Living 2. Foods for Constipation | Johns Hopkins Medicine 3. Eating Well as You Age - HelpGuide.org 4. Dehydration - Symptoms and causes - Mayo Clinic

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