

MALNUTRITION AND DEHYDRATION THE TWIN CHALLENGES OF SENIOR NUTRITION

Along the same lines, the *AJN* offers numerous explanations for senior dehydration, including diminished sense of thirst; medication effects; dementia or other declines in cognitive functioning; and chronic illness. In addition, the body's natural tendency is to dehydrate with age. For instance, according to Victoria Principal, Home Instead Senior Care's senior makeover expert, "When we're born our bodies are 80 percent moisture and by the time we die that has decreased to 64 percent."

Thus, it appears as if for seniors, maintaining hydration may be an ongoing challenge due to these types of age-related changes and increased risk factors for dehydration. However, there are some simple solutions to these two potentially serious problems.

For one, the FDA suggests that simple companionship and a bit of well-placed assistance can help lonely seniors get back on the right track to good nutrition. For instance, family members, friends or neighbors, or professional caregivers can check on – or even join – seniors to ensure they're eating nutritiously and regularly. Another good idea is for these "interested others" to prepare these meals for seniors.

And, caregivers providing meal assistance to seniors should follow slightly different nutritional guidelines than the ones in use for younger adults – something that leads us to the really good news here.

Namely, the "Tufts Food Guide Pyramid for Older Adults" simultaneously addresses the issues of both nutrition and dehydration because it uses at its base not a grain and cereal level – as with the USDA pyramid designed for younger persons – but instead a requirement suggesting seniors drink at least eight 8-ounce glasses of water or certain other non-alcoholic beverages daily.

The Tufts Food Guide Pyramid for Older Adults then moves up through the following levels: grains and cereals; fruits and vegetables; dairy products, legumes, lean meat and fish, and eggs; and fats and sugars. Finally, this pyramid is topped with another item that does not appear in the younger persons' USDA food pyramid: a special vitamin/supplements "flag," added as a reminder that many seniors cannot meet their nutritional needs through diet alone.

COOKING UNDER PRESSURE

Arm Family Caregivers with Resources for Healthy Aging

Healthy eating is essential for people of all ages. But for many seniors, a well-balanced diet is the key to feeling their best.

The problems of aging, though, can interfere with a healthy diet – in more ways than one.

According to research, 62 percent of adult children caring for an older adult reported three or more nutritional risks in their senior. These were:

1. Three or more prescribed or over-the-counter drugs per day.
2. An illness or condition that made the senior change his or her diet.
3. Having lost or gained more than 10 pounds in the past six months without trying.¹

We see seniors every day whose health is affected by multiple medications and illnesses. So what do family caregivers look for to signal that their loved one may not be eating properly?

Here are the signs:

1. **Loss of appetite.** If your senior has always been a hearty eater but no longer eats as he or she used to, it's time to find out why. Underlying illness could be the root cause.
2. **Little to no interest in eating out.** If your loved one has always loved eating out at a favorite restaurant but no longer shows interest, dig deeper to determine the problem.
3. **Depression.** Change in appetite is a classic sign of depression. Be sure to follow up with a physician if you suspect depression may be a problem.
4. **Sudden weight fluctuation.** A weight change – losing or gaining 10 pounds in six months – is another sign that something could be amiss.
5. **Expired or spoiled food.** Check the refrigerator for expired or spoiled food. Seniors could be “saving” food until it's no longer safe. Make sure that all food is labeled, with the date, in large letters and numbers.
6. **Skin tone.** Observe your senior's skin tone. If your loved one is eating properly, the skin should look healthy and well-hydrated.
7. **Lethargy.** If your older adult has regularly been active and enjoyed taking walks, but suddenly becomes lethargic, encourage a visit to the doctor. Poor nutrition could be to blame.
8. **Cognitive problems.** Seniors who live alone might forget to eat. Dementia and cognitive problems can lead to nutritional deficiencies. Quick intervention is vital.
9. **More than three medications.** Medication can influence both appetite and weight. Check with your senior's doctor to find out if medications could be the culprit.
10. **A recent illness.** Illness or a hospital stay could make a senior stop eating. Keep tabs on your loved one's recovery, making sure reliable help at home is available.

Nutritious and delicious meals are so important to keeping seniors healthy. That's why Home Instead Senior Care has launched the *Cooking Under Pressure* nutrition campaign. We're helping to educate family members who are sometimes stressed-out by the demands of caregiving.

Partnering with nutrition experts at the University of Maryland and Duke University Medical Center, we've developed a handbook of nutrition tips as well as healthy recipes for seniors. The handbook is available free through my Home Instead Senior Care office. A Web site at www.foodsforseniors.com provides additional resources.

We know family caregivers need help. In the Home Instead Senior Care survey, 83 percent of family caregivers assist with groceries or other errands; 65 percent help with meal preparation.²

Support is vital for seniors as well. "Without good nutrition, health can deteriorate very quickly, making seniors more susceptible to disease and infection," said Dr. Nadine Sahyoun. She's the Associate Professor of Nutrition and Food Science at the University of Maryland who worked with us. And without intervention, malnutrition can lead to poor health and even death, she explained.

There are many other challenges to eating well. These include loss of appetite, memory problems, dental health and use of certain medications, she added.

Social support and assistance in shopping and preparing meals are the essential ingredients many older adults need. That support can come in several forms:

1. Help from a family or professional caregiver.
2. Taking part in a congregate meal program – such as those at a senior center.
3. Contracting for a home delivery program such as meals on wheels.

In addition, seniors and their family caregivers need knowledge in selecting food rich in nutrients, she noted.

Older adults require less food as they age and they can't eat as much. But their needs for vitamins and minerals can increase, the experts say. That's where the Home Instead Senior Care campaign will help.

Our national nutrition experts have helped us identify 12 nutritious foods, recipes that feature those foods as well as other resources that can help give caregivers the support they need. You'll find those in the *Cooking Under Pressure* handbook.

Those 12 foods, which can be combined with fresh ingredients for nutritious recipes, are:

1. Oatmeal
2. Eggs
3. Yogurt
4. Blueberries
5. Apples
6. Fish
7. Chicken
8. Broccoli
9. Soy
10. Sweet Potatoes and Squash

11. Rice

12. Dark Chocolate

Cooking for seniors also offers its own unique challenges to caregivers. Our research revealed that caring for older adults with those three nutritional risk factors I mentioned earlier was stressful.

Of the caregivers who rated their lives as extremely stressful, 67 percent were caring for loved ones with three or more nutritional risk factors compared with 33 percent of caregivers whose seniors had fewer than three nutritional risk factors.³

Experts advise stressed-out family caregivers to get organized. Make a shopping list. You'll find additional tips in the handbook as well as the Web site www.foodsforseniors.com.

Buy fresh ingredients and prepare meals with older adults, enticing them with what they like to eat. Bring in new recipes and ingredients; we all get in a rut.

Make eating a happy event, our experts say. We focus too much on what people can't eat and don't give enough attention to what food represents to us. Food is at the core of our lives – it's the smell, color, feel, texture and social aspect. We have to pay attention to those things.

1,2,3. The Boomer Project (www.boomerproject.com) completed online interviews with 1,279 U.S. adult caregivers, ages 35-62, with a parent, stepparent or older relative for whom they or someone in their household provides care. Questions regarding nutritional risk factors and stress adapted from Abbott Laboratories' "Determine Your Nutritional Health" checklist. Used with the permission of Abbott Laboratories, copyright 2008.