

ASSURING ADEQUATE NUTRITIONAL INTAKE

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Maximizing one's resiliency potential requires adequate nutrient intake. There are a variety of reasons an older person may have difficulty with eating. The purpose of this resource paper is to provide you with information and ideas that can help assure adequate nutrition.

This paper is not intended to address specific dietary restrictions. Consult with a Registered Dietician or a Speech-Language Pathologist about specific diets.

Adequate nutrition is vital in assuring energy, strength, healing, good cognitive functioning, and a strong immune system. There are a number of practical issues that may be interfering with getting enough nutrition. This document will provide you with some practical considerations that can help.



START WITH ONE'S PREFERENCES

A good place to begin is to consider your personal preferences. While there may be numerous reports on what *healthy* eating should look like, it is largely useless if you do not like those foods. This is especially important if you are not wanting to eat or are not eating enough to maintain your desired weight.

What are your favorite foods? When nothing sounds very good, those are the foods that are most likely to tempt you to eat at least a few bites. If someone else is preparing your food, make sure they know what kind of food and seasonings you prefer. Hopefully, the food will also look attractive and have varied colors, shapes, and textures. Few people prefer bland food. Be sure foods are being served at their ideal temperature for maximizing smell and taste.

If you can't find something that sounds good, have food delivered or brought in from your favorite restaurant or fast food place. Your objective is to eat adequately and to supply your body with necessary nutrients for the sake of your health.



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You can also get tasty, nutrient-dense, easy to eat meals by adding leftover meats and vegetables to a chicken broth base along with your favorite spices. You can even make it easier by drinking it from a cup. Plus, it helps with food costs while providing for vegetable needs.

IDENTIFY ANYTHING THAT MAY BE INTERFERING WITH TASTE

It is important to be aware of things that may be interfering with your food tasting good. If it doesn't taste right and you have ruled out differences in how foods are prepared, consider what may be interfering with taste.

A stuffy nose can interfere with the sense of smell and subsequently impact the sense of taste. You can treat congestion with over-the-counter treatments or try Amish Therapeutic Soup, a mixture of chicken broth, chicken pieces, celery, onion, garlic, and pepper that can be used as a natural remedy for congestion.

Some medications can affect how food tastes or cause a dry mouth, making it harder to taste food. Some of the medications that can alter how food tastes include:

Anti-Inflammatory and Pain Medications - These may include corticosteroids such as prednisone and dexamethasone as well as ibuprofen, indomethacin and ketoprofen. Morphine can also cause a dry mouth.

Cardiovascular Medications - These include ACE inhibitors, beta blockers, calcium channel blockers, and statins.

Antibiotics and Antifungals - These include ampicillin, azithromycin, ciprofloxacin, clarithromycin, griseofulvin, metronidazole, ofloxacin, and tetracycline.

Antidepressants - These include amitriptyline, clomipramine, desipramine, doxepin, imipramine, and nortriptyline.

Antihistamines and Decongestants - These include chlorpheniramine, loratadine, and pseudoephedrine.

Central Nervous System Stimulants - These include amphetamines like Adderall, Vyvanse, and pseudoephedrine.

Diabetes Drugs - These include metformin and insulin

Asthma Drugs - Albuterol

Antacids - Ranitidine and omeprazole

Vitamins - These include Potassium and Vitamin D2

Taste differences can be caused by a drug's adverse impact on sensory properties, the actual disruption of taste and smell signals, and/or the creation of an excessively dry mouth.

If you suspect medications are interfering with nutrient intake by causing a dry mouth, try sucking on hard candy or chewing gum before beginning a meal. Brushing teeth before a meal may also help get rid of a bad taste so that food is more appealing. **NEVER TAKE CRUSHED MEDICATIONS WITH A MEAL AS IT IS SURE TO IMPACT TASTE.**

If you have been taking antibiotics, you may need to be checked for thrush, which causes white lesions in the mouth and makes eating uncomfortable. Eating probiotics found in Greek Style Yogurt or sauerkraut or getting probiotic medication while taking antibiotics can help prevent Thrush.

If you suspect that medication may be interfering with your nutritional intake, talk to your Primary Care Provider or Pharmacist to see if the medication continues to be necessary or if there is an alternative that is less likely to impact taste.

There are some prescription medications used to actually enhance appetite. These are often used following surgery, trauma, or chronic infections that have resulted in the person not eating. Medications often used include: Megase ES (megeztrol); Remeron (mirtazapine); and Marinol (dronabinol). Discuss consideration of these meds with your treating primary care provider and weigh potential benefits.



THE MECHANICS OF EATING

There are a variety of factors, unrelated to the food, that may be interfering with adequate nutrition:

THE ABILITY TO CHEW – Is the condition of your teeth affecting your ability to chew? Do your dentures fit properly? Be sure to use proper dental adhesives so your dentures are not slipping. If there is a problem, consult with your dentist to work on improving your ability to chew. In the meantime, maybe soft foods, nutritious liquids, or pureed foods such as soups are in order.

MANAGING SECRETIONS - If you regularly drool due to a neurological disorder, you may need medication to help control that drooling while eating.

THE ABILITY TO SEE – Vision problems can interfere with eating by making it difficult to see your food and the plate it is being served on. If someone is assisting you, be sure they separate items on the plate so that each item can be more easily seen. And placing the plate on a contrasting color placemat makes it easier to see.

MECHANICS – The process of eating, itself, may cause difficulty due to limited coordination, dexterity, or strength. There are many pieces of adaptive equipment that can help people continue to feed themselves:

- Plates – A suction cup that adheres to the table can make it easier to manage. Divided plates make it easier to scoop food items successfully.
- Cups – Handles can make it easier to manage a glass or cup. A lid makes it less likely to spill. A straw may help make drinking easier.
- Silverware – With built up grips, special silverware can make it easier to scoop foods.



- Finger Foods – Almost any food can be turned into a food that does not need utensils. By making little sandwiches, fried vegetables, fruit pieces, and meat strips, regular foods become finger foods. Cookies, ice cream bars, pigs in a blanket, cereal bars, deviled eggs, and cheese and crackers can make well-balanced, easy to eat finger food meals if you have difficulty using tools. Paired with pureed soup in a cup, it is easy to create a varied, delicious diet if you have trouble using utensils.

In order to maintain your independence, it is vital to maintain the hand to mouth pattern that enables you to feed yourself. If someone assists you at mealtime, don't allow them to simply feed you, even though it might seem easier and quicker for both of you if you have a tremor or other problem that makes it difficult to feed yourself. Instead, have them either place finger food or spoon in your hand, then have them guide your hand to scoop up the food or bring the finger food to your mouth. Losing the ability to feed yourself becomes harder to reclaim when someone does it for you. Being unable to feed yourself can also hasten the need for nursing home care.



SLIGHTLY THICKENED FOODS - Many older people may have difficulty swallowing thin liquids, causing choking and even aspiration. This does not necessarily mean you need to be on a special thickened diet. It may just suggest the need to avoid thinner liquids. Consult with a Registered Dietician or a Speech Language Pathologist if you have specific questions about your dietary needs.

If you have swallowing issues, you want to eat foods that taste good and tend to be easy to swallow. Some foods that are generally nutritious and easy to swallow include:

Scrambled eggs (can add soft vegetables and/or cheese)

Yogurt

Custards

Puddings

Smoothies

Fruit Juices

Pureed Soups



Mashed Potatoes and Gravy

Oatmeal or cream of wheat

Polenta (can add soft vegetables or meats)

Baked Flaky Fish such as salmon or Pollock

SUPPLEMENTS

If you are not getting enough calories daily, there are a number of things you can try to add to the needed nutritional intake. Generally, a woman over the age of 75 needs 1800 to 2200 calories daily and a man over 75 should take in 2000 to 2400 calories a day. If you are concerned that you're not eating enough, record your calorie intake. You can use online information to track a reasonably close summary of calories consumed. This is important so you can determine whether your interventions are working, or if you need to find additional strategies.

Instead of eating 3 meals a day, you can try 6 little meals spread throughout the day. Where a large amount of food may seem overwhelming, having smaller mini-meals may seem easier to manage.

Have healthy snacks like cereal bars, ice cream, yogurt, peanut butter sandwiches, or fresh fruit readily available.

Ensure, Boost, Kate's Farm, and other supplements provide tasty shakes that have a high nutrient and calorie level. Four of these a day can supply most of the nutrients people must have. These supplements can be further enhanced by adding ice cream and/or extra protein powder.

Blended smoothies with yogurt and fruit or vegetables make a tasty, nutrient-dense supplement as do ready-to-drink yogurt drinks. Ice cream bars and fruit popsicles also add calories, nutrition, and hydration. Cereal bars and soft nutrition bars also have great food value and add calories in an easy to eat form. Sweeteners may make a difference in helping you get adequate nutrition if you have gotten used to only liking the taste of sweets. Rather than denying yourself sweets, use your preference to make other foods tastier. Sugar, brown sugar, maple syrup, or honey can be lightly used to create a sweet flavor and make foods taste better without sacrificing the nutrient value of the meal.



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SOCIALIZATION

Eating with others encourages greater food intake. Set up meal opportunities that create pleasant environments that support socialization. Avoid too much background distraction like television or loud music. Encourage your family or friends to visit to create a social eating situation.



If possible, transfer into a regular chair to eat rather than eating from a wheelchair. This will help assure the right height for eating.

Going out to a meal at a favorite restaurant can also help “prime the pump” if you’re not eating because you don’t feel hungry.

Do you have a favorite meal that sounds good to you? Maybe ask a friend or family member to help you plan, shop for ingredients, prepare it, and share it with you. Active involvement in making the meal may help jump start your appetite.

CONCLUSION

Getting adequate nutrition is not an option. It is a critical part of sustaining life and helping you bounce back from any difficulty you are experiencing. And without good nutrition, you will have trouble maintaining your independent lifestyle. It is not a problem you can ignore, but it is often a problem you can solve.

Be a good detective in determining anything that may be interfering with normal eating. Get creative. Find ways to move beyond the barriers that seem to be interfering with success. Always track your results so you know if you are making progress. Be sure anyone working with you is helping you find consistent strategies that work for you.

Eating is a pleasurable part of life. With creative problem solving, you can find ways to get both the pleasure and the nutrition you need.

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Renee Kilgore Parson is the Nursing and Care Manager for the Bounce Back Project. Before going back to college to become a nurse, she worked as a caregiver in a senior community that focused on helping elders bounce back after setbacks. She brings years of direct experience using restorative methods and in training nurses, care assistants, and others in restorative care strategies.

Renee learned first-hand that merely “taking care” of seniors resulted in their deterioration, while encouraging them to do as much as possible for themselves helped them continue being independent or return to independence after a physical setback. She provides practical strategies to help elders, staff, and caregivers overcome common problems that occur in the aging process and when recuperating from illness.

Melanie Adair has had over 20 years’ experience operating and managing senior independent living, assisted living, and integrated memory care using restorative care strategies. With a background in health care management, speech and language pathology, psychology, and staff development, she has served as a health care manager, consultant and trainer, helping staff learn methods to maximize the potential of those they are working with.

Melanie has extensive experience working with the principles of psychobiology in linking thoughts and expectations to a better path for recovery from health care challenges. She recognizes elders’ ability to grow and learn and live their best lives by never giving up when faced with problems, but instead work with them to discover new possibilities.