

Alberta Healthy Living Program (Diversity, Mandarin, and Cantonese)

Malnutrition

Introduction:

Malnutrition is not just about lack of food. It happens when our bodies do not get the right nutrients (energy/ calories, protein and vitamins or minerals) to function properly. This could mean that we are eating too few or too many calories and not getting enough vitamins or minerals.

Malnutrition, in short, includes undernutrition (wasting, low weight-for-height; stunting, low height-for-age and underweight low weight-for-age); inadequate vitamins or minerals, overweight, obesity, and resulting diet-related noncommunicable diseases.

Malnutrition often goes unnoticed which can lead to long-term health problems.

Who is at risk of malnutrition?

In Canada, the latest statistic, shows that 1 in 3 older adults (individuals above 65 years old) living in the community are at nutrition risk. Older adults, who may have difficulties eating, a decreased in appetite, limited ability to cook or prepare food or access to nutritious foods.

20 to 45% of patients admitted to hospital are malnourished.

People with chronic health conditions such as cancer, diabetes who have higher nutritional needs.

People and families who struggle with food insecurity (inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints).

What are the common health effects of a poor diet?

- Unintentional weight loss, which is also muscle loss. Muscle mass has many important functions such as to help us with our strength (balance), reduce our risk of falls and independence (reduce ability to perform everyday tasks such as showering, getting dressed or preparing meals).
- Weaker immune systems slower recovery illness (cold, flu, infection) and injuries.
- Loss of appetite and lack of interest in food and/or drinks (fluids).
- Low energy level and tiredness.
- Difficulty staying warm.

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- Issues with chewing and swallowing.
- Poor growth in children.

How do we screen malnutrition?

There are simple and easy to use tools that can be used by your Primary Health Care providers such as physicians, pharmacists, dietitians and other clinicians, to identify individuals that are at nutrition risk.

SCREEN 8 (8 questions, quick identification of nutrition risk and can help providers identify who needs resources or a referral to a dietitian). It only takes 5 to 10 minutes and helps to identify nutrition problems early on with the individual.

- Weight changed in the past 6 months?
- Do you skip meals?
- How would you describe your appetite?
- Do you cough, choke, or have pain when swallowing fluids?
- How many pieces or servings of *vegetables* and fruits do you eat in a day?
- How many cups of fluid do you drink in a day?
- Do you eat one or more meals a day with someone?
- How are your meals being prepared (self / others)?

Additionally, we would recommend following up with two other questions:

- Financial hardship.
- Food access such as ability to get groceries.

How do I know if I am or the person, I am caring for are at a risk of malnutrition?

Important things to monitor:

- Weight loss or muscle loss;
- Body strength (weakness, fatigue, frailty, mobility and coordination issues);
- Poor appetite, chewing or swallowing problems, changes in taste/ smell;
- Depression, mental health issues, cognitive/ memory changes;

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- Social isolation, lack of transportation, food insecurity (inflation), low income.

Food is medicine. Eating enough and well can keep our strength up. When our bodies do not receive enough nutrients from our food, our body systems do not function properly.

Malnutrition is about more than weight. Individuals of any body size and shape can be malnourished.

I was told by my friends that being a senior, I need to eat lesser food compared to my younger days. Is this true?

Eating less food (volume) and eating well is not the same. Eating well is important at any age, but this is especially important as you get older to help maintain independence, well-functioning body and mind.

Eating well, is healthy eating and with regular physical activity, can help give you the energy to do things you need and enjoy such as taking care of your home, working, volunteering, playing with your grandchildren, travelling and socializing with your family and friends.

What is eating well? How do I eat well?

- (1) Aim for at least 3 meals each day. As we age, our appetites may decrease, however we still need enough food to get the necessary vitamins, minerals, and protein to stay healthy.
- (2) Eat meals with family and friends as often as possible is a great way to connect and add enjoyment to your life. Often when we eat with others, we tend to plan, cook and eat a variety of foods. Studies have shown that eating with others also increases our appetite.
- (3) Enjoy a variety of healthy foods to make sure you get enough different nutrients you need.

Choose a variety of vegetables and fruits, whole grain foods and protein foods that you enjoy, every day. For examples:

- colourful vegetables and fruits are rich in vitamins and minerals including:
 - Bok choy, egg plants, gailans, carrots, tomatoes, Japanese squash
 - Apples, oranges, pears, berries, topical fruits such as mangoes, papaya, pineapples
- Whole grain foods are sources of fibre, vitamins and minerals such as:
 - Oat (oatmeal), barley, millet, mixed wild, brown rice
- Eating a variety of protein foods will ensure you get key nutrients like vitamin B12, D, E, calcium and iron:
 - Fish and shellfish, prawns, crabs

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- Lean meats
- Eggs
- Tofu
- Dried beans or low-sodium canned beans, peas, lentils or edamame
- Unsalted nuts and seed, nut butters
- Lower fat dairy products (2% or lesser), milk, yogurt
- Fortified soy beverages

(4) Healthy food portion, to put it into simple term, we can adapt the handy portion size. For example: at dinner, 1 fist size of rice, 2 fists size of vegetables + fruits, 1 palm size of meat.

(5) Staying hydrated. Water is the best choice for staying hydrated. Other foods and drinks that can help keep you hydrated include:

- No sugar fortified plant-based beverages
- Lower fat milk
- Low sodium prepared soups
- Tea, coffee (caffeine < 300mg daily)
- Vegetables and fruits.

Drinking enough fluids will help keep you hydrated and prevent headaches, dizziness and constipated.

- As you age, your sense of thirst may decline, and it is important to drink regularly whether you are feeling thirsty or not.
- Often it is important to ask yourself if you are drinking enough fluid such as
 - (i) do I feel thirsty?
 - (ii) do my mouth or lips feel dry?
 - (iii) is my urine dark yellow and does it have a strong smell?
 - (iv) do I feel dizzy, or I have a headache?

If you answered “yes” to one of these questions, you may not be drinking enough fluids. Drink some fluids to rehydrate!

With changes in food prices and trying to save some money on food can sometimes leave us to feel like we have to compromised on nutrition. Eating healthy does not have to cost more. Some of the tips to eat healthy on a budget:

- (1) Look for senior discount days and shops flyers to compare prices between similar food items and brands. Some grocery stores (Save-On-Foods, Real Canadian Superstore, No Frills) price match items.
- (2) Go shopping with family and friends and split large packages.
- (3) Make a list and take stock of items you already have in your pantry, fridge or freezer before you shop. With the list for groceries that you need to purchase and stick to the list when you are at the grocery store.
- (4) Finally buy foods that are in-season, frozen vegetables and fruits and canned low-sodium/ low-sugar vegetables and fruits.

If you are experiencing challenges travelling to and from the grocery store, there are some helpful tips to access healthy foods with and without transportation:

- (1) Check if a community program offers rides to grocery store
- (2) Order your grocery by phone or online for home delivery
- (3) Ask a family member or friend who drives if you can go together to grocery store
- (4) Split the cost of taxi or ride share program with a friend

Should I take vitamin and mineral supplements to make sure that I am getting what I need when I am not eating right?

It is not necessary except for vitamin D supplement. Alberta Health Services recommends a daily supplement of 1000 IU of Vitamin D for both men and women over the age of 50.

In short, you can get the majority of nutrients you need by following the recommendations in Canada's Food Guide.

Vitamin and mineral supplements do not provide the benefits of food such as fibre, carbohydrate, fat, protein and calories. If you're concerned about whether you are getting enough nutrients, please speak to your dietitian or health care provider. Many times, taking more supplements do not mean it is good for our health.

Can supplements be dangerous?

It can be. Generally speaking, a daily multivitamin is usually safe. However, it is important to take note that some vitamins and minerals are dangerous when taken in large amounts, if you take them as single nutrient supplements. For example, vitamin A and iron are toxic in high doses.

For some supplements, if you take too much, you may experience unpleasant gastrointestinal tract side effects such as diarrhea. For example, magnesium, vitamin C in higher doses may also cause diarrhea. Again, please speak to your pharmacists, physicians or dietitian before starting a higher dose supplement to make sure it is right for you.

Take away message:

Good nutrition is important at any age.

Eat 3 meals a day and snacks. Include foods high in protein at meals and snacks. Food with protein includes meat (fish, chicken, duck, pork, beef, lamb, prawns, crabs, lobsters), eggs, tofu, legumes (soy, lentils), nuts and seeds, milk and dairy / alternatives products (soy, almond and oat beverages that are fortified with calcium).

Eat with others (family, friends) whenever possible.

Unless instructed by the physicians, avoid weight loss, which is often muscle loss. Seek help of a dietitian to get the guidance you need.

For general information about health or nutrition, call Healthlink 811 for free nurse or dietitian advice. Healthlink services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If you need free interpreter services, please speak the language you need in English.