

Malnutrition among the Elderly

By Kate McCarthy, Director of Operations at HomeAid Health Care

Malnutrition is now being recognized as a major health risk among the elderly. Studies show that an increasing number of Americans over 65 are not getting the calories, proteins or essential vitamins and minerals necessary for good health. In fact, according to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, only 17% of the older adult population is actually consuming a quality diet. Surveys show that 30% of seniors skip at least one meal a day and many are living on less than 1000 calories daily. An estimated 15 – 20% of the over 65 population suffers from malnourishment. At a time when the entire country is concerned about obesity and overeating, it sounds amazing that a substantial segment of American's elderly are going hungry.

There are many reasons why the elderly are not eating the quality or quantity of food they need.

- Reduction in sensitivity to taste and smell. A loss of appetite is often related to an older person's loss of ability to taste and smell foods.
- Medications. Side effect of medications or combinations of medications can cause a reduction of appetite, increase instances of nausea and make food taste differently.
- Poor dental health. Poorly fitted dentures, jaw pain, mouth sores and missing teeth make chewing difficult and can lead to avoidance of eating protein laden meats.
- Financial difficulties. Living on a fixed income often means the elderly must decide between purchasing quality foods and paying bills.
- Inability to shop. Navigating busy street and crowded shops can be daunting for the elderly, especially in bad weather. Many forego shopping for fresh produce and try to get by with what is on hand.
- Physical frailty. Lack of strength, arthritic pain, dizziness or disabilities can make even simple meal preparation too much of a task.
- Forgetfulness. Dementia, Alzheimer's disease and poor memory can hinder a senior from eating a proper variety of foods on a regular schedule. It is common among elderly with cognitive challenges to skip meals and not be aware of when they last ate.
- Depression. Sadness due to difficulties with health, loss of family and friends or loneliness can affect appetite and cause an elderly person to lose interest in food.

Malnutrition leaves an elder open to nutrient deficiencies, muscle atrophy, and a weakened immune system. It plays a role in morbidity, mortality, recovery from illness, overcoming functional disabilities and physical complications. Malnutrition is directly related to increases in infections, imbalances in electrolytes, loss of skin integrity, anemia and overall weakness and fatigue.

It is not always easy to recognize if an elderly loved one is suffering from malnutrition. Weight is not always a good indication. According to Dr. William B. Bateman Jr. of the Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, a person can be quite overweight and still be

nutritionally starving to death from a protein point of view. The obvious signs of malnutrition are loss of appetite and an unintentional loss body fat. Other indicators include dry and dull hair, conjunctive dryness and a receding of the gums. An onset of mental confusion, light-headedness, loss of taste and smell, weakness in motor skills, falls and fractures, and skin sores are all indications that dietary imbalances exist.

The problem is that many of the symptoms of malnutrition among the elderly are commonly thought of as a natural part of the aging process and not seen as signs of a treatable condition. Even among medical professionals, many older patients with nutrition risks have their symptoms treated without care providers addressing the root of the problem. The fact that elderly experience a physiological decline, grow frail, and become increasingly susceptible to illness had long been accepted as just an unfortunate part of aging. Yet recent findings show that many of the common conditions associated with aging are largely related to malnutrition.

Gerontologists are now excited about recent evidence that indicates that the illness and disease burden experienced by elderly could be significantly lightened by following a better diet. According to Dr. Ranjit K. Chandra of the Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada, it is not impossible for 80- or 90-year-olds to have immune systems similar to that of a 40-year old if their dietary needs are not compromised. Even those elderly who have suffered from malnutrition can begin to restore their immune systems, improving their resistance to diseases, by correcting dietary deficits.

Following a proper diet is essential to the health and longevity of seniors and the elderly. By consuming a nutritionally balanced diet seniors can add years of health to their lives. To learn more about the specific nutritional needs of the elderly check out the "Elderly Nutrition Handout" available at www.scribd.com.

Sources:

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HomeAid Health Care
Helping Hands at Home

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