

How to Watch for – and Help Prevent – Malnutrition in Older Adults

Older adults are at a larger risk of malnutrition. Malnutrition is defined as the state of being poorly nourished – and it doesn't just happen to those who suffer from food insecurity. Conditions like cancer, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes and depression can sometimes lower a person's appetite or make eating more difficult. Restricted diets can also lead to inadequate nutrition. And medications can sometimes interact poorly with food.

Malnutrition is so common that the increased health costs of malnutrition to the United States are more than \$51 billion annually, according to the non-profit Alliance for Aging Research. Of course, the "cost" to you as a caregiver can be much more personal. It can be difficult and even frightening to see your family member or friend lose weight rapidly and in large amounts. The following steps may help you prevent malnutrition and communicate the risks involved.

Step 1. Withdrawal from Activities

You spend a lot of time with the person you're caring for. But it can sometimes be hard to spot changes in a person when you see them every day. Be on the lookout for specific signs of malnutrition like:

- Lack of appetite or interest in food or drink
- Loss of fat, muscle mass and body tissue
- Longer healing time, including wounds
- Depression, tiredness and irritability
- Always feeling cold
- Inability to concentrate



If the person under your care is losing weight too quickly or showing any of the warning signs on page 1, contact their doctor right away. In the meantime, you can provide the doctor with helpful information if you keep close tabs on your loved one's nutritional intake.

Step 2. Monitor, Observe and Report

Have a conversation with the person in your care, if they're able to, about their appetite. Are they getting enough to eat? Is there anything keeping them from being able to eat properly? Although someone may say they're not hungry, it might be up to you to observe any changes in behavior and eating patterns. You can take the following steps to help keep an eye on their nutritional health:

- Keep a weekly record of weight, and note any changes in how clothing fits.
- Whenever possible, observe eating habits. What is he or she eating? How much?
- Track medication intake, and investigate possible side effects that might affect appetite or the body's ability to absorb nutrients.

With this information, your family member's or friend's doctor can try and determine the cause. This can help them give you specific instructions on a treatment plan.

Step 3. Boost Nutrition and Food Intake

Once you have a plan from the doctor, it's important to stick to that plan. But there are also ways you can help boost the nutrition of your family member or friend. Try some of the following:

- Encourage healthy snacking between meals.
- Add flavor to meals and increase interest in eating by adding herbs and spices to dishes.
- Prepare soups, shakes, or broth to eat alongside meals for extra calories that may be easier to swallow.
- Plan and prepare or purchase meals with nutrient-dense food that includes a variety of fruits, vegetables, lean meats, whole grains and fish.

Battling malnutrition is a big job for a caregiver, but by taking these steps, you'll help make good nutrition a priority for the person in your care — and that may pave the way to better overall health and well-being.

Sources:

National Institute of Health: Malnutrition and aging

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2563720/>

Alliance for Aging Research: Malnutrition in older adults

<https://www.agingresearch.org/campaign/malnutrition/>

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