

More Nutritional Suggestions for Seniors

As noted in previous Homecare Library entries, seniors have different nutritional needs and since these are not readily understood by the seniors themselves, they can become malnourished. Recent studies have shown that the incidence of clinically-defined malnutrition among seniors admitted to hospital can run as high as 50%.

Proper nutrition is important for increased mental acuteness, disease resistance, stronger immune system, greater energy, faster recuperation and the management of chronic diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes. Since the senses of taste and smell change with age, there can be a reduction in appetite. It is important therefore that caregivers ensure that a senior's diet is carefully-selected and well-balanced.

Following are some suggestions:

Fruits and vegetables - A simple rule of thumb is that the more colorful the better. Dark reds, greens, rich yellows and oranges mean they are loaded with vitamins and antioxidants. High fibre fruits and vegetables are very important for slower digestive systems.

Grains - Whole grains such as whole wheat, oatmeal, kasha, barley, rice, corn and quinoa are high in fibre which protects against heart disease, infections and respiratory problems. They are a good source of vitamin B.

Meat or chicken - Choose lean meats, skinless chicken or turkey breasts which supply protein and vitamin B-12. They are low in those fats that cause heart problems. Red meat can also prevent anemia which is caused by poor nutrient absorption of certain medications.

Fish - Oily fish like salmon provide omega-3 fatty acids which have been shown to fight cholesterol build-up and reduce the risk of Alzheimer's.

Dairy - Seniors need 1200 mg of calcium a day to help prevent osteoporosis and bone fractures. This can be supplied, in part, by dairy products which are also a good source of vitamin D.

Water - Seniors are more prone to dehydration because their bodies lose the ability to regulate fluids and their sense of thirst is dulled. Taking water regularly during the day, as well as with meals, will help avoid urinary tract infections and constipation. It's also been shown to reduce confusion.

Even if caregivers provide seniors with a healthy selection of foods, they may still not eat as well as they should – often because they simply forget. Here are some suggestions to insure proper nutritional intake.

Enhance aromas and flavors - with spices, marinades, dressings and sauces. These are known to stimulate appetites.

Make eating a special event - encourage them to eat with friends and set out nice place settings.

Encourage healthy snacking – Many seniors don't like large meals or don't feel hungry enough to eat three full meals a day. Instead provide them with smaller but still nutritionally-rich meals with fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

Take care of dental problems – Poor dental health can reduce the pleasure of eating. Make sure dentures fit and cavities are looked after.

Take them shopping – In addition to the sheer value of going outside, bringing seniors to the grocery store can stimulate their desire for certain foods that they had forgotten about.

Establish regular eating times – Scheduling meals at the same time each day with visual and verbal reminders will underscore the importance of eating regularly.

In a homecare situation, regular eating can sometimes be subordinated to other activities. In fact, it is preferable to plan the whole day around eating. This will give the day a focus and help ensure that seniors get the nutrition they need.