



## Nutritional Needs of the Elderly

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Describe functions of the gastrointestinal system.
2. Identify factors that may affect nutrition in elderly clients.
3. Discuss changes in nutrient requirements with aging.
4. Discuss interventions to promote nutrition in elderly clients.

Proper nutrition is a very important part of life, throughout the life span. The foods and fluids we take in provide nutrients that give us energy, help our bodies to build and repair tissues, and allow normal body functions to occur. For elders, good nutrition is important



to help them remain active and healthy during their later years, when chronic illnesses are most likely to occur.

This newsletter will discuss nutrition and aging, including factors affecting nutrition and changes in nutritional requirements. A review of the normal function of the gastrointestinal (GI) system and the role of nutrients in body functions will also be covered.

### The Gastrointestinal System

Digestion is the breakdown of foods into simple nutrients that can be used by the body. This process begins in the mouth as food is chewed, and then saliva acts on it through chemicals called enzymes. The food is swallowed and travels down the esophagus. It enters the stomach, where acid and enzymes cause further digestion. The food then moves from the stomach into the small intestine, an important site for digesting and absorbing nutrients.



The nutrients pass through the wall of the small intestine and into the blood stream. From there, they are carried to cells throughout the body for nourishment. The un-used food moves into the large intestine, and is then removed from the body as feces, commonly called stool.

### Health Effects of Nutrition

At every age, good nutrition is essential to good health. Many of the most common chronic diseases are associated with poor nutrition. These include type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, heart disease and obesity.

There are six main types of nutrients that are essential for good health:

**Protein:** Provides building blocks needed to build and repair body tissues, such as muscle. Good sources include meat, eggs, dry beans, and dairy products like milk.

**Carbohydrates:** An important energy source, found in sweet or starchy foods such as bread, cereal, pasta, fruits and vegetables.

**Fats:** These also provide energy for the body, as well as promote vitamin absorption and hormonal functions. They are found in foods such as butter, oil, peanut butter, mayonnaise, nuts, and avocados.

**Vitamins and minerals:** Are essential for many body functions, such as maintaining strong bones

and teeth, forming blood cells, fighting infections and for normal growth and repair of body tissues. Vitamins and minerals are found in many foods, including meats, fruits, vegetables, breads/grains and dairy products.

*Water:* Drinking enough fluids every day helps to maintain good blood flow, effective urinary and bowel elimination, and normal body chemistry. Unless it is restricted for health reasons, most adults need 2-3 quarts of fluid per day.



The amount of various nutrients required for good health changes with aging. Compared to younger adults, the elderly require fewer calories, and less of some nutrients, such as iron and sodium. The need for other nutrients, such as calcium, vitamin D, and some B vitamins, is increased in the elderly.

### Effects of Aging on Nutrition

As people age, their ability to take in food, digest and use nutrients, and eliminate waste changes. This places the elderly at increased risk for malnutrition. Some of these changes include:

*Dental problems:* Many elderly clients suffer from tooth loss or ill-fitting dentures. This makes it difficult or painful to chew food properly.

*Difficulty feeding self:* Due to physical problems such as tremors, weakness, fatigue, or poor vision.

*Decreased taste & smell:* These changes can decrease appetite.

*Decreased digestive enzymes:* May cause excess gas, GI upset and poor use of nutrients.

*Decreased GI muscle tone:* May cause constipation and decreased appetite.

*Decreased metabolism:* The metabolic rate is the number of calories required daily. It decreases with age, resulting in decreased calorie needs and often, decreased appetite.

*Changing fluid balance:* The elderly have a lower percentage of body water and a decreased awareness of thirst. This increases the risk for dehydration.

*Weakened gag reflex:* Increases the risk for choking, aspiration and pneumonia.

*Medications:* Many medications taken by elderly clients, such as diuretics, stomach acid blockers, and blood pressure and cholesterol drugs, may cause loss of certain essential nutrients from the body.



### Promoting Good Nutrition

To obtain the nutrients necessary for good health, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends the following daily food intake:

Grains- bread, cereal, rice, pasta	6 ounces
Vegetables	2.5 cups
Fruit	2 cups
Dairy- milk, yogurt, cheese	3 cups
Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans	5.5 ounces

Good choices include lean meats, low-fat dairy products, whole grains, and a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables. Adequate fluid intake and fiber-rich foods, such as whole grains, vegetables and fruits, help to prevent constipation. Foods that should be limited or avoided include those with saturated fats and added sugar. Daily sodium intake should be less than 2300 mg, or significantly lower if a reduced-sodium diet is prescribed.



When working with your client at mealtimes, take note of any difficulty she has with eating or drinking. Does she struggle to chew food well or to swallow it? Is it difficult for her to use utensils to get food to her mouth? Does she eat just a small amount? Let the nurse know of any concerns you notice. Also, weigh the client as ordered to help identify any increase or decrease in body weight.

It is important for your client to enjoy his meals in a relaxed environment and to not feel rushed. Sit with the client, making eye contact and pleasant talk, if he enjoys this. Give only as much help as the client requires to eat well. Promote independence by encouraging him to use a spoon or hold bread. You may need to cut food, open containers, help get the food to his mouth, and explain what foods are being served. Allow enough time for chewing, and offer fluids frequently.

If a client is not eating well, nutritional supplements, such as Ensure, may be ordered. These supplements come in the form of shakes, pudding, and ice cream, and provide extra calories, protein and other nutrients. They vary widely in taste, so if the client will not accept the ordered supplement, let the nurse know so that another can be tried. Offer the supplements between meals. If they are taken too close to a meal, the client's appetite may be poor and his food intake may decrease.

Your knowledge and care can promote the health of elderly clients through good nutrition.



## Nutritional Needs of the Elderly

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- \_\_\_\_ 1. The process of food digestion begins in the:  
A. stomach  
B. mouth  
C. large intestine  
D. esophagus
  
- \_\_\_\_ 2. The most important site in the GI tract for absorption of nutrients is the:  
A. stomach  
B. rectum  
C. esophagus  
D. small intestine
  
- \_\_\_\_ 3. Which of the following conditions is LEAST likely to be associated with poor nutrition?  
A. osteoporosis  
B. emphysema  
C. type 2 diabetes  
D. heart disease
  
- \_\_\_\_ 4. Mrs. Roberts has muscle wasting due to a long illness. To help her rebuild muscle tissue, it is very important that she have an adequate intake of:  
A. carbohydrate  
B. fat  
C. protein  
D. vitamins
  
- \_\_\_\_ 5. Which of the following foods is a good source of carbohydrates?  
A. mayonnaise  
B. cereal  
C. eggs  
D. steak

- \_\_\_6. In general, elderly persons require less of which of the following nutrients?
- A. iron
  - B. B vitamins
  - C. vitamin D
  - D. calcium
- \_\_\_7. Malnutrition can result from which of the following issues?
- A. poorly-fitting dentures
  - B. changes in ability to taste and smell
  - C. taking certain medications, such as diuretics
  - D. all of the above
- \_\_\_8. The body's metabolic rate decreases as people age, resulting in a decrease in calorie needs for the elderly.
- A. True
  - B. False
- \_\_\_9. Mr. Bell is not able to feed himself very well. He is slow to eat, and sometimes cannot get the spoon to his mouth. The home health aide can best help to meet his needs by:
- A. letting him feed himself, even if he eats just a little, so that he is completely independent
  - B. helping to feed him and encouraging him to do things he is able to, such as holding the bread
  - C. feeding him as quickly as possible, so that he doesn't take too long to eat
  - D. encouraging him to sit back and relax while being fed, so that he doesn't have to do anything but chew
- \_\_\_10. When nutritional supplements, such as Ensure, are used, they should be offered:
- A. with meals
  - B. right after a meal
  - C. between meals
  - D. just before a meal

