

NUTRITION AND AGING:

MAXIMIZING THE CAREGIVER'S ROLE

PEOPLE ARE LIVING LONGER

By 2050, the number of older adults (60+) globally is expected to reach 2.1 billion, up from 1 billion in 2020.¹ Aging is a complex process that introduces physical, emotional, cognitive, and economic changes² that can make it harder for older adults to access the nutrients they need, placing them at an increased risk for malnutrition. These changes can have a negative effect on nutrition status.



MENTAL HEALTH

Loss of memory, confusion, dementia, depression



ECONOMIC HEALTH

Poverty/limited income, food insecurity, difficulty finding transportation



EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Social isolation, loneliness



PHYSICAL HEALTH

- Altered body composition: loss of muscle
- Sensory changes: taste, smell, and perception of thirst
- Poor dentition: difficulty chewing, inability to eat certain foods
- Chronic (long-term) health conditions: cancer, diabetes, heart disease

UP TO 50% OF OLDER ADULTS ARE AT RISK FOR MALNUTRITION³

MALNUTRITION

Malnutrition—which can refer to both under- and overnutrition—is an imbalance in a person's energy and/or nutrient intake.⁴ It can cause loss of muscle mass, making it harder to maintain ongoing health and independence.⁵

The primary focus of this resource is undernutrition.

MALNUTRITION IN OLDER ADULTS CAN:

- Lead to more health complications, falls, and hospital readmissions^{6,7}
- Increase healthcare costs⁸
- Decrease quality of life⁹

WHAT SHOULD CAREGIVERS LOOK FOR IN OLDER ADULTS?



WEIGHT

- Have they recently lost weight?
- Do their clothes appear to be fitting more loosely?



EATING HABITS

- Have their eating habits significantly changed?
- Do they seem less interested in the foods they once enjoyed?



HYDRATION

- Has their fluid intake decreased significantly?



ACCESS TO FOOD

- Is there enough food in the home?



INDEPENDENCE

- Can they leave the home to get the food they need?
- Can they prepare meals?
- Are they able to feed themselves?



BEHAVIOR CHANGES

- Are they showing signs of weakness?
- Do they display signs of confusion or a decline in mental health status?



SOCIAL CHANGES

- Do they have limited social contact with family and friends?



FINANCIAL CHANGES

- Have they mentioned a change in their financial status?

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Caregivers can promote good nutrition by addressing common nutrition concerns.
This will help older adults meet their nutrition needs.

NUTRITION CONCERN



CALORIES

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

CALORIES come from carbohydrates, protein, and fat and provide our bodies with the energy they need to function.

Choosing to eat a wide variety of foods can help older adults meet their calorie needs and get key nutrients, including different vitamins and minerals.

ENCOURAGE OLDER ADULTS TO...

- Eat at least 3 meals a day
- Eat snacks throughout the day for extra calories
- Add herbs and spices to foods to enhance interest in eating
- Increase food variety by preparing meals and snacks with nutrient-rich foods (eg, fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fish, and lean meats)



PROTEIN

PROTEIN helps our bodies maintain muscle mass and strength, which is crucial for older adults, especially during periods of stress or illness.

- Increase protein in the diet by eating meats, eggs, low-fat dairy foods (milk, yogurt, and cheese), seeds, and nuts
- Consider adding a high-protein oral nutrition supplement to meals and snacks



FLUIDS

FLUIDS, such as water or electrolyte solutions, help to regulate body temperature, maintain fluid balance in cells, and absorb nutrients.

Older adults are at an increased risk for dehydration due to physical changes. When older adults are dehydrated, it can negatively affect their mental status, cause dizziness, and increase risk of falls.

- Drink fluids in the morning, before each meal, and an hour before bed
- Keep a water bottle nearby to drink throughout the day, even if they don't feel thirsty
- Discuss with their physician any medications they take since these could affect hydration status, and determine the need for an electrolyte solution to quickly replenish fluids and electrolytes

HELPFUL IDEAS FOR CAREGIVERS



ASSIST WITH MEAL PLANNING & PREPARATION

- Prepare meals together and store for later
- Shop for groceries together



MAKE MEALS A SOCIAL EVENT

- Enjoy a meal at a favorite restaurant
- Encourage participating in social programs with members of the community
- Visit during mealtimes



CONSIDER FOOD COSTS

- Find money-saving shopping approaches, such as visiting grocery store websites ahead of time to look for coupons
- Find resources within the community to help reduce food costs



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1. World Health Organization. Ageing and health. Published October 1, 2025. Accessed November 7, 2025. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health> | 2. Mangels AR. Am J Nurs. 2018;118(3):34-41. | 3. Kaiser MJ, et al. J Am Geriatr Soc. 2010;58(9):1734-1738. | 4. World Health Organization. Malnutrition. Published May 7, 2025. Accessed November 7, 2025. <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/malnutrition> | 5. Deutz NEP, et al. J Am Med Dir Assoc. 2019;20(1):22-27. | 6. Barrett ML, et al. Non-maternal and Non-neonatal Inpatient Stays in the United States Involving Malnutrition, 2016. U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Published August 30, 2018. Accessed November 7, 2025. https://hcup-us.ahrq.gov/reports/ata glance/HCUPMalnutritionHospReport_083018.pdf | 7. Norman K, et al. Clin Nutr. 2008;27(1):5-15. | 8. Snider JT, et al. JPEN J Parenter Enteral Nutr. 2014;38(2 Suppl):77S-85S. | 9. Rasheed S, et al. Ageing Res Rev. 2013;12(2):561-566.