

Food Fact Sheet: Malnutrition

Malnutrition is a condition which happens when you don't get the correct amount of nutrients from your diet

Malnutrition is a major public health issue costing the NHS over £19 billion per year in England alone. There are approximately 3 million people in the UK who are malnourished or at risk of malnutrition; 93% are living in their own home, 5% are living in care homes and just 2% are in hospital. Consequences of malnutrition include:

- increased risk of illness and infection
- slower wound healing
- increased risk of falls
- low mood
- reduced energy levels
- reduced muscle strength
- reduced quality of life
- reduced independence and ability to carry out daily activities

This Food Fact Sheet will help you understand the signs of malnutrition and how to either stop it happening or to treat it.

Spotting malnutrition

Malnutrition can affect anyone, but it is more common for older people and those who are socially isolated. This can be because they can't get out much or because they have poor physical or mental health. It can happen over a long period of time which sometimes makes it difficult to spot. Common signs of malnutrition are:

- unplanned weight loss – which can cause clothes, dentures, belts or jewellery to become loose
- tiredness and lethargy
- alterations in mood
- loss of appetite
- disinterest in food and/or fluids
- loss of muscle strength

Stopping and treating malnutrition

A balanced diet is essential for health and wellbeing. When someone has a poor appetite and is malnourished, nutrient dense foods as well as drinks containing nutrition can help to improve energy intake without making portions too big to manage.

Protein, energy (calories) and vitamins and minerals are all important for people who are malnourished.

If you follow the points listed here, you can make sure you are eating well:

- Eat 2-3 portions of high protein foods every day such as meat, fish, eggs, nuts, beans, pulses, soya, tofu and other meat-free protein foods.
- Eat/drink 2-3 portions of dairy foods every day such as cheese, milk and yoghurt or non-dairy alternatives like soya, almond or coconut milk.
- Eat a serving of starchy food at each meal (e.g. bread, cereals, potatoes, pasta or rice).
- Eat some fruit and vegetables every day (fresh, frozen, tinned, dried or juiced).
- If you enjoy fish, go for oily fish such as mackerel, salmon, herring, trout, pilchards or sardines as these are rich in omega-3 fatty acids. Aim for 2 portions a week (can be tinned or frozen for convenience).
- Have at least 6-8 glasses/mugs of fluid every day, choosing drinks which contain some nutrition where possible such as milky drinks (malted drinks, hot chocolate, milky coffee, smoothies and milkshakes) which can provide energy, protein and vitamins and minerals or sugary drinks such as fruit juice, fizzy drinks or squash can provide extra energy.*

The following simple ideas will help you to increase the amount of energy and protein which you eat in a day:

- Eat 'little and often' – try a small snack between meals and a dessert after lunch and evening meal.
- Try not to have drinks just before meals to avoid feeling too full to eat.
- Avoid low fat/diet versions of foods and drinks for example skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, low fat yoghurt, sugar free drinks etc, or watery soups.
- Choose meals that you enjoy, are easy to prepare and eat, and are high in energy and protein. Items such as tinned fish or beans are easily stored and easy to prepare.
- If you are preparing food for others, remember that as we get older, our taste buds change. Older people may prefer much sweeter tastes than they used to.
- Add extra energy and protein to foods and fluid by adding high energy and protein ingredients – see above for ideas.

Add extra energy by adding high calorie ingredients to food and drinks – suggestions listed below:

| Add cheese* to | Add Skimmed Milk Powder to | Add sugar*, jam or honey to | Add ground almonds or nut butter to |
|--------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Sauces (aim for milky/creamy sauces) | Milk: add four tablespoons of skimmed milk powder to each pint of full fat milk and use this in drinks, with breakfast cereals and in cooking | Cereal or porridge | Porridge |
| Pasta dishes/pizza | Porridge | Puddings | Vegetable soups |
| Soups | Mashed potato | Hot drinks | Sauces |
| Scrambled egg/omlettes | Sauces | Milkshakes/smoothies | Smoothies |
| Mashed potatoes | Custard | Glaze vegetables | |
| Beans on toast | Milk puddings | | |
| Vegetables | Creamy soups | | |
| | Milkshakes/smoothies | | |

Other high energy and protein foods include:*

- cheese and crackers
- thick and creamy yoghurt
- Pot of custard or rice pudding
- nuts and seeds
- cereal bar or flapjack
- Bombay mix
- mini pork pie, sausage roll or scotch egg
- chocolate

* If there are any health concerns which have previously required you to limit fat and sugar in your diet, e.g. diabetes or high cholesterol, you should discuss whether you still need to limit these with a health professional.

Ready meals, meal delivery services and online shopping

You may find that your energy levels change throughout the week and that on some days you feel better than others. Here are some suggestions to make preparing meals easier:

- Make the most of the 'good days' by preparing extra meals which you can store in the fridge/freezer as individual portions for 'bad days'.
- Buy a selection of fresh or frozen ready meals for times when you are not able to cook.
- Make use of meal home delivery services such as Wiltshire Farm Foods and Oakhouse Foods - supermarkets also offer online shopping and home delivery services which may make shopping easier for you.

Swallowing difficulties

If you notice any of the following when eating or drinking you should seek advice from a healthcare professional such as your GP or practice nurse, who can refer you on to specialist speech and language therapist or a dietitian:

- difficulty swallowing
- choking or coughing
- bringing food back up, sometimes through your nose
- a sensation that food is stuck in your throat or chest
- a change in the sound of your voice whilst/soon after eating i.e. your voice sounds 'wet'

- Check dentures fit correctly - if not, visit your dentist.
- If you have difficulty using cutlery or with coordination, try 'finger foods' such as toast, sandwiches, biscuits, chunks of meat, cheese, vegetables or fruit cut into pieces etc.
- If you also suffer from constipation, try gradually increasing your fibre intake by consuming beans, lentils, fruit and vegetables and wholegrain foods whilst also increasing your fluid intake. You may need to fortify these foods as explained earlier.
- Regular exercise may help increase your appetite and build up your strength - start with something easy for you and increase the intensity gradually.
- If you have vision problems or for people with dementia, try using a coloured plate so that the food stands out from the plate.

Eating environment

Try to make sure that where you eat is as pleasant as possible and that meals and snacks look appealing. Eating with others often helps to encourage appetite.

Summary

Malnutrition is a common problem and if it is not spotted or treated it can make you very ill. The simple steps outlined above should help to identify and treat the condition. If these simple steps do not seem to help, seek advice from a healthcare professional.