Malnutrition in older adults

Malnutrition is a common problem. Malnutrition happens when you do not get the right amount of nutrients from your diet.

Malnutrition can:

- increase risk of illness and infection
- slow wound healing
- increase risk of falls
- lead to low mood
- reduce energy levels
- reduce strength and mobility
- reduce quality of life
- mean you need more help with daily activities

This Food Fact Sheet will show you the signs of malnutrition and how to avoid or manage it.

How do I spot malnutrition?

Malnutrition can affect anyone. It is more common for older adults and those who live on their own. Malnutrition can happen slowly, which can make it hard to spot. Common signs of malnutrition are:

- unplanned weight loss - clothes, dentures, belts or jewellery become loose
- loss of appetite
- less interest in food and/or drinks
- loss of muscle strength
- tiredness
- changes in mood

How do I avoid malnutrition?

The BDA's Eating, Drinking and Ageing Well resource shows you how to avoid malnutrition in older age.

How can I manage malnutrition?

Eating a variety of foods helps you get the energy, protein, vitamins, minerals and fibre your body needs. Nutrient-dense foods and drinks have lots of nutrients, so it's good to include these where you can. They will not make your portions bigger but give you more of what you need. Use the ideas in Tables 1 and 2 to help you eat little and often:

- Choose two nutrient-dense snacks a day
- Add two nutrient-dense ingredients to foods and drinks a day

Table 1

Ready-made nutrient-dense snack	Portion size
Cheese and cracker	1 cracker + small chunk of cheese
Cheese scone	1/2 scone
Custard	150g tub
Falafel	2x 22g
Greek yoghurt	150g tub
Cooked egg	1
Nuts	Small handful (40g)
Rice pudding	150g tub

- Choose nutrient-dense drinks, like milky drinks or milkshakes, malted drinks, hot chocolate
- Avoid drinks just before meals (to not feel too full before you eat)
- Avoid low energy foods and drinks e.g. skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, low fat or fat free yoghurt
- Choose meals you enjoy and ones that are easy to prepare and eat
- As we get older, our taste buds may change. You may prefer stronger or sweeter tastes than you used to

Ready meals, meal delivery services and online shopping

You may feel better on some days more than others. Some ideas to help you on days when you don't feel well are:

- Fresh or frozen ready meals
- If you can, make a few extra meals when you feel well. Store them in the fridge or freezer
- Use supermarket online shopping
- Use meal home delivery services



Table 2

Nutrient-dense food fortifier	Portion size	Could be added to a portion of:
Cheese, grated	1 tablespoon (10g)	Potatoes, vegetables
Egg	1	Custard, milk puddings, mashed potato
Dried, skimmed milk powder	1 tablespoon (15g)	Custard, milk puddings, 'cream of' soups, porridge, mashed potato
Greek yoghurt	1 generous tablespoon (45g)	Porridge
Ground nuts e.g. peanuts or almonds	1 tablespoon (15g)	Vegetable soups, stews, casseroles, curries, porridge
Nut butter e.g. peanut butter	1 tablespoon (15g)	Porridge, vegetable soups, stews, casseroles, curries
Paneer, grated	1 tablespoon (10g)	Curries
Pea protein powder	1 tablespoon (17g)	Vegetable soups, stews, casseroles, curries
Soy protein powder	1 tablespoon (14g)	Vegetable soups, stews, casseroles, curries

Swallowing

If you choke, cough, or your voice sounds strange after eating or drinking, ask a healthcare professional for advice.

Other things to consider:

- If dentures don't fit correctly, visit your dentist
- If you have constipation (not able to go for a poo), make sure you drink enough. Increase your fibre intake by having beans, lentils, fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. You may need to add some nutrient-dense ingredients to these foods – see Table 2
- Regular activity can increase your appetite and build up your strength. The BDA's Eating, Drinking and Ageing Well resource can guide you about activity
- If you have sight problems, try non-patterned, plain coloured plates. This makes the food stand out from the plate
- If you can't use cutlery, try finger foods, such as toast, sandwiches, biscuits, chunks of meat, cheese, vegetables or fruit cut into pieces

Eating environment

Try to make sure that where you eat is as pleasant as possible. Meals and snacks that look nice can make you want to eat them. Eating with others can also help you to eat better.

Top tips

- A balanced diet should give you all the nutrients you need including protein, energy (calories), vitamins and minerals, fibre and fluid
- Nutrient-dense foods and drinks have lots of nutrients including energy, protein, vitamins and minerals and sometimes fibre. Nutrient-dense foods and drinks can improve your intake without making portions too big
- Choose meals that you enjoy, are easy to prepare and eat
- Have nutrient-dense snacks between meals
- Add extra nutrients to foods and drinks using nutrient-dense ingredients
- Choose nutrient-dense drinks such as milky drinks

If these simple steps do not help, ask for advice from a healthcare professional.

This Food Fact Sheet is a public service of The British Dietetic Association (BDA) intended for information only. It is not a substitute for proper medical diagnosis or dietary advice given by a dietitian.

If you need to see a dietitian, visit your GP for a referral or bda.uk.com/find-a-dietitian for a private dietitian. You can check your dietitian is registered at hcpc-uk.org.

This Food Fact Sheet and others are available to download free of charge at bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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