

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 in excess of £13 billion per year. There are approximately 3 million people in the UK who are malnourished or at risk of malnutrition; 93% of these are thought to be living in their own homes; 5% in care homes and just 2% 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; however it is particularly common amongst older people and those who are socially isolated 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, calorie dense foods and drinks containing fat and sugar can help to improve energy intake without making portions too big to manage.

Protein is also 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 drinks every day, choosing high calorie drinks where possible such as milky drinks (malted drinks, hot chocolate, milky coffee, smoothies and milkshakes) or sugary drinks such as fruit juice, fizzy drinks or squash can provide extra energy.*

The following simple ideas will help you 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 as we get older, our taste buds change. Older people often prefer much sweeter tastes than they used to.

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 extra fats* eg. butter, margarine, oils or mayonnaise to	Add cream* to
Sauces (aim for milky/creamy sauces)	milk: add up to four tablespoons of skimmed milk powder to a pint of full fat milk and use this in drinks and with breakfast cereals	Cereal or porridge	Mashed potatoes	Sauces
Pasta dishes/pizza	Porridge	Puddings	Toast/bread	Mashed potatoes
Soups	Mashed potato	Hot drinks	Sauces	Soups
Scrambled egg/omlettes	Sauces	Milkshakes/smoothies	Glaze vegetables	Puddings
Mashed potatoes	Custard	Glaze vegetables		Cakes
Beans on toast	Milk puddings			Cereal or porridge
	Creamy soups			Milkshakes/smoothies
	Milkshakes/smoothies			Fruit

Add extra energy and protein to foods and fluid by adding high energy and protein ingredients – see above for ideas.

Other high energy and protein foods include*

- cheese and crackers
- thick and creamy yoghurt
- nuts and seeds
- peanut butter
- Bombay mix
- chips
- 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 this 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 ready meals for times when you are not up for cooking.
- Make use of meal home delivery services - 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'.

Other things to consider:

- 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 etc.
- If you 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.
- 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.

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.

This Food Factsheet 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: www.freelancedietitians.org for a private dietitian. To check your dietitian is registered check www.hpc-uk.org

This Food Fact Sheet and others are available to download free of charge at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts Written by Kirsten Crothers, Dietitian, reviewed by Kirsten Crowthers and Stacey Jones, Dietitians.

The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts © BDA October 2015. Review date October 2018.

