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Nutrition Nuggets

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Promoting Enjoyment and Safety in Patient Feeding

At end-of-life when the pleasurable aspects of living become limited, meal and snack times can become some of a patient’s few remaining pleasures. A primary factor in our ability to avoid discouragement and depression is the amount of positive experiences we have on a daily basis.

Therefore, it’s especially important to do everything we can to preserve the enjoyment of eating while ensuring safety. In this way we can do much to maintain quality of life for all hospice patients.

Patient Preferences

Everyone prefers the familiar foods they are accustomed to eating. We need to inquire of the patient and family as to particular likes and dislikes. This includes information regarding usual amounts eaten and meal/snack times.

It’s important to work with the patient as much as possible in creating a food plan that will be acceptable and appealing. This is especially important for patients who are underweight and those who do not consume a well-rounded diet with adequate amounts from all food groups.

When a patient refuses food, he or she needs to be offered another option. This is especially critical for those who have increased nutritional needs, such as those who are underweight, experiencing infections, ulcerations, or severe trauma

Indications for Feeding

There are a number of signs that a resident may require assistance with feeding. These may include poor intake due to:

- cognitive decline
- difficulty swallowing
- dry mouth
- disinterest in eating
- tremors or paralysis
- vision impairment

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Special Points of Interest:

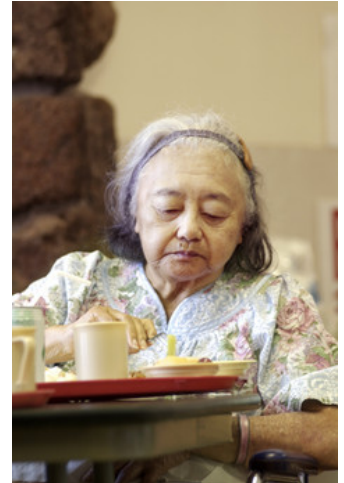
- Enjoyment of food is very important for quality of life.
- The patient’s emotional state can affect appetite.
- Make the dining experience special.
- Watch for signs of dehydration and poor eating.
- Eating in an upright position is an important safety measure.
- There are numerous ways to add supplemental protein and calories to the diet.

Promoting a Pleasant Dining Experience

An attractive setting, courteous and congenial service, and pleasant company all contribute greatly to the enjoyment of meals. The dining area should be clean, uncluttered, and free of unpleasant odors. Amenities such as soft music, a small vase of flowers, and nice dishes help the patient feel special and add much to the pleasure of dining.

A gentle, caring attitude in serving patients is crucial. It's also best to avoid taking vital signs or conducting other non-essential monitoring during mealtimes.

We all enjoy ourselves more when we look nice, so it can significantly boost morale to help patients with dressing, hygiene, and grooming before meals, especially when they dine with others. Tooth brushing or oral hygiene before meals may improve taste sensitivity to some flavors.



Make mealtime special to enhance enjoyment of eating.

Precautions

It is important to report changes in patients' eating habits. Here are some things to watch for:

- Difficulties in swallowing, including coughing or choking while eating
- Problems with chewing due to mouth pain or ill-fitting dentures
- A change in the patient's ability to eat or drink without assistance
- A marked change in the amount of food the patient eats
- Complaints that food tastes "funny"
- Signs of confusion or difficulty in focusing on eating
- The emotional state of patients as negative feelings like anger, grief, sadness and depression can reduce appetite

It is also important to look for signs of dehydration and report them immediately. In the final days of life, it's common for patients to lose interest in eating and drinking. The nurse or Hospice care aide can aid the caregiver in distinguishing dehydration that requires treatment.

Patients frequently experience a sense of loss when they are put on a special diet and they can no longer enjoy their favorite foods or seasonings. Frequently, modified versions of the forbidden favorites are available such as sugar-free ice cream for diabetics or salt substitutes for those with high blood pressure.

It's important to work with the patient and make the effort to find acceptable substitutes of foods they are no longer allowed. Otherwise, they may become depressed, feeling that their remaining few pleasures are being removed.



Pain and emotional trauma can result in loss of appetite.

Assisting With Feeding

If a patient is eating in bed, elevate the head to 30 to 45 degrees so that gravity can assist in the swallowing process and the chances of choking are minimized. Additionally, keep them upright for at least 20 minutes after meals to reduce the possibility of gastric reflux.

If a patient avoids any major food group, ask them why and endeavor to find substitutes for foods that are refused. Patiently assist those who cannot feed themselves, paying attention to any preferences that they may have.

After a patient is done eating, note the approximate percentage of each food and beverage that has been consumed. Report these percentages to the nurse or Hospice care aide.



Too large a bite can be frustrating to the patient.

Dietary Supplements

Many patients have difficulty consuming enough food to supply adequate calories and protein. Supplements are frequently used to improve nutrition and these can be commercial products or homemade. Included are shakes, puddings, smoothies, commercial formulas, and foods fortified with extra calories and protein through additional fat, dry milk powder, peanut butter, etc.

Examples of patients who benefit from supplements include:

- Those who can swallow liquids better than solids
- Those who have difficulty consuming adequate amounts of food
- Those with an altered sense of taste and smell
- Those who are underweight

Here's a recipe from *Betty Crocker's Living With Cancer Cookbook* that is very nutritious and tastes great on crackers, wraps, sandwiches, or as a topping for vegetables.

Easy Salmon Spread

- 8 ounce package of cream cheese, softened
- 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ oz can red or pink salmon, drained and flaked
- 3 tbsp finely chopped scallions
- 2 tbsp chopped fresh or frozen dill weed (or $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp dried dill)
- 1 tbsp Dijon mustard
- 2 tbsp capers, if desired

Combine all ingredients in a small mixing bowl. Store in a plastic container in the refrigerator. This also freezes well so you can keep it in the freezer in small portions and take them out as needed.



Salmon Spread is a versatile item, high in protein and calories.

In Summary

Adequate nutrition can become a challenge for many reasons and especially at end-of-life when so many body processes are compromised by disease and debility. Since food and drink give enjoyment to life, caregivers need to be aware of ways these daily pleasures can be preserved and optimized. In cases where there are difficulties getting adequate calories, problems with swallowing, or any other nutritional issues, the Registered Dietitian can be consulted to search for the best solution.

For Further Information:

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