Arbor Hospice
DIGNITY • COMFORT • PEACE

Common Reasons Aging Adults Do Not Receive Enough Nutrition

By Jill Gettle, Arbor Hospice Registered Dietitian

As we age, receiving the nutrition our bodies need is hindered by new obstacles. The statements below are some of the most common comments I hear from seniors regarding their eating. Addressing these concerns is an important step in reducing the incidence of malnutrition and dehydration in seniors, as well as the potential for depression due to inability to consume favorite foods and fluids.

"Nothing tastes the same" Aging adults often tell me that food tastes too salty, too sweet, too spicy, or that it has no flavor at all. Our sense of taste and smell change over time, and some of our favorite foods no longer taste right. Medications can also change how food tastes. If food tastes too strong, try limiting processed foods which often have a lot of added salt and sugar. While adding seasoning to favorite recipes may have been common practice in the past, try cooking without seasoning and add it later, if desired.. Experimenting with different spices or herbs may make recipes more appealing.

"I just can't eat that much food" or "I am just not hungry" Decreased hunger and a lack of appetite is common in aging adults. A full plate of food may seem overwhelming for seniors, and they may actually eat less when faced with too much. Try decreasing meal portions and increase frequency of snacks. Limit concentrated sweets as they can diminish appetite and eat foods high in nutritional value. While fluids are important, drinking large quantities before or with meals can cause less consumption of more nutritious foods.

"I have trouble getting the food to my mouth" The simple act of eating can be difficult for some people, causing a decrease in nutritional intake. Arthritis, loss of strength or an illness often make holding utensils more difficult. Try using utensils with thick, soft foam-like handles, such as OXO Good Grips Utensils. The head of a fork and spoon can also be bent to the right or left if desired. Plates with sides may be helpful for people who have trouble getting food on their forks. Buying dishes with suction cup bottoms can keep plates from sliding away. There is also a large variety of drink ware that can make drinking easier.

"I have trouble chewing or swallowing" Chewing and swallowing problems can have a dramatic impact on nutritional status. Ill fitting dentures, missing teeth and mouth sores can make eating and drinking very difficult, and may cause people to limit the types of food that they choose. Often a dentist can help alleviate or minimize these issues. A level 2 or mechanical soft diet, which contains chopped meats and soft foods, can be appropriate for people with these concerns. Those who suffer from Dysphasia, defined as difficulty chewing and swallowing, often limit their eating choices and are afraid to eat due to coughing and aspiration. Refusing to eat, pocketing food, frequent throat clearing, taking a long time to eat and unexplained weight loss are some of the warning signs of Dysphagia. A level 1 or pureed diet may be helpful for people with Dysphagia.

Arbor Hospice
DIGNITY • COMFORT • PEACE

The following information, provided by the National Dysphagia Diet Task Force, may be helpful to those with Dysphagia.

National Dysphagia Diet Levels:

Level 1 - Puree

- Pureed, homogenous and cohesive foods
- Moist, pudding-like consistencies without particles
- Provides a nutritionally-adequate, easily-swallowed diet with minimal chewing

Level 2 - Mechanical Soft

- Cohesive, moist and semi-solid
- Requires some chewing ability
- Includes ground or minced meats and fruits and vegetables mashable with a fork
- May include foods from the Level 1 diet
- Excludes most bread products, crackers and other dry products

Level 3 - Dysphagia Advanced

- Soft-solids
- Requires more chewing ability
- Includes easy-to-cut meats, fruits and vegetables
- Regular textured foods, with the exception of hard, chunky food items are allowed
- May include foods from Level 1 and 2

Level 4 - Regular

- Any solid texture

Liquids for Dysphagia - Thin liquids can be especially difficult to swallow for those with Dysphagia, and can cause choking. Thickened liquids, which move slower through the mouth and esophagus are easier to swallow. There are a few different consistencies of thickened liquids, including: nectar-like, honey-like and spoon thick. These can be either purchased ready to drink, or as a powdered thickener (like Thick It or ThickenUp) and can be added to regular liquids.