

Church Name

Jane Doe, RN, FCN

ASSISTING OLDER ADULTS WITH MEAL PREPARATION

One-third of adults over 65 suffer from nutritional deficiencies. Older adults absorb fewer nutrients from the food they eat, so a well-balanced healthy diet is especially important.

General Tips:

- Plan meals keeping the likes and dislikes of the older adult in mind as much as possible.
- Older adults who are still able may enjoy assisting with food preparation.
- Older adults experience a decreased ability to taste or smell food, making eating less enjoyable for them and potentially affecting their nutrition. Illness, physical problems, pain, and anxiety can also affect the appetite. Attractively presented meals and a pleasant environment can help to stimulate a poor appetite.
- Some medications affect the body's ability to absorb nutrients. Consult your pharmacist if you have questions.
- Well-fitting dentures are essential to consumption and absorption of a healthy diet. Be alert for complaints of a sore mouth caused by ill-fitting dentures. If the older adult frequently removes his/her dentures, they may not fit well. The older adult should visit the dentist regularly.
- If the older adult has difficulty swallowing, have him/her seen by a physician. Speech/language therapy may be recommended. Soft foods or thickened liquids, prepared by mixing a packet of thickener in each glass of liquid, may help. Cut the food in small pieces. Avoid foods with coarse textures (nuts, popcorn, raw fruits or vegetables). Ask a nurse to teach you the Heimlich maneuver to prepare you to provide first aid to someone who is choking.
- Older adults who are isolated and lonely may become depressed. These factors affect their eating and nutrition. Congregate dining is available at Senior Centers in many communities providing socialization along with a nutritious meal. Many of these centers provide transportation.

Tips for planning nutritious meals:

- The older adult's diet should feature foods high in nutrients and should limit nutritionally-poor foods—those high in fat and refined sugar. Avoid trans fats. Read food labels.
- An adequate fluid intake is extremely important to the health of everyone, but especially older adults. They are more prone to dehydration than younger adults since they do not have as keen a sense of thirst. (Water forms the base of the recently recommended food pyramid for older adults—see below.) Adequate fluids also help prevent constipation. At least eight eight-ounce glasses a day are recommended to balance fluids lost in the urine, feces, and sweat, and by exhalation. Water is the best beverage. A slice of lemon may make a glass of water more appealing. Encourage fluids during the daytime hours up to and with supper by offering small amounts often. Limit fluids after supper to minimize the need to pass urine during the night. Older adults sometimes think that by limiting fluids they will reduce problems with incontinence. However, the strong, concentrated urine that results from a low fluid intake is irritating to the bladder and more likely to cause incontinence. It is advisable that the older adult limit intake of coffee, tea, or caffeinated sodas to one cup. Caffeine acts like a diuretic, pulling fluid out of the body.
- Protein is important to healing and should be part of the older adult's diet.
- A person's caloric needs decrease with each decade of life so fewer calories are needed to keep weight stable. Complex carbohydrates (whole grains) are preferred over simple carbohydrates (sugar-filled foods). This is especially true for diabetics, but fiber-filled carbohydrates will improve the bowel function of all older adults. Fresh fruits and vegetables are also a good source of fiber. Older adults have an increased need for fiber to maintain normal bowel function.
- Vegetables are an important source of vitamins and the older adult should eat several servings a day. However, it is also a good idea for all older adults to take a multi-vitamin tablet once a day.
- To summarize dietary recommendations, adults should consume daily:
 - Two or three servings of milk or cottage cheese (both fat free or low fat) or cheese.
 - Two servings of meat, fish (once a week), poultry, eggs, dried beans or peas, or nuts. (OVER)

Tip Sheets provided through the NOAH Project, a grant-funded project of the
Faith Community Nurse Network of the Greater Twin Cities.

www.fcntc.org

- Three servings of vegetables and two of fruits, including dark green or yellow vegetables, citrus fruit, or tomatoes.
- Four or more servings of whole grain breads or cereals.

(The recommended food pyramid for older adults is displayed and discussed at <http://jn.nutrition.org/cgi/content/full/129/3/751>).

Tips for planning special diets:

If a special diet has been ordered for the older adult, ask the physician or a nurse for written instructions. Here are a few principles:

- Low fat/cholesterol diet: Avoid red meat, especially if marbled, cheese, 2% milk, and other high-fat foods.
- Diabetic diet: Provide a well-balanced diet that limits concentrated sweets. An occasional dessert such as angel food cake is allowed. Follow also the recommendations for a low fat/cholesterol diet since diabetics are prone to artery disease.
- Low salt diet: Avoid cured meats such as bacon and lunch meats, pickled products, and packaged and prepared foods as these are very high in salt. Avoid salty snacks. Also high in salt are regular canned soups and vegetables. Read food labels, noting the milligrams of sodium in the product. Do not add salt; instead, try seasoning food with herbs or a salt-free seasoning such as Mrs. Dash. (NOTE: a high intake of salt can raise the blood pressure of some older adults.)

Tips regarding special meal planning needs of the memory-impaired older adult:

- As memory loss progresses, the older adult may forget to eat, or may eat a poorly-balanced diet, perhaps consisting mainly of desserts. He/she may also hide food or eat food that has spoiled. The older adult's eating patterns may put him/her at risk for medical problems caused or exacerbated by poor nutrition. If you are not cooking for the older adult, monitor foods in his/her refrigerator and cupboards. Purchase healthy foods and encourage consumption of them. Ask the physician whether a nutritional supplement (such as Ensure) is indicated. If you are cooking for this older adult, monitor his/her intake to try to ensure a well-balanced diet and to prevent nutritional deficiencies.
- Check the temperature of foods and beverages served to the memory-impaired older adult. He/she may lack the judgment necessary to avoid burning his/her mouth.
- Eliminate situations that tend to confuse memory-impaired older adults by:
 - Avoiding dishes with patterns if these confuse him/her.
 - Removing condiments from the table if he/she doesn't know how to use them or overuses them.
 - Putting out only one utensil at a time if more than one is confusing.
 - Limiting the number of foods on the plate if the older adult has difficulty choosing which food to eat. Serve one type of food at a time.
- Cut foods such as meat into small bite-sized portions since the older adult may forget to cut them or to chew adequately. Select tender cuts of meat.
- Assuring an adequate fluid intake is even more important for the memory-impaired older adult since they may completely forget to drink liquids. If he/she rejects water, offer fruit juices. Limits these in diabetics, however, as they are high in sugar.
- If the older adult becomes less able or willing to use utensils, serve finger foods. This will extend his/her ability to eat independently.
- Messy eating habits may accompany progressive memory loss. If this happens, adjusting to it is easier than fighting it. Serve his/her food on a plastic tablecloth in a room in which the floor can be easily cleaned. Provide him/her with a cover-up smock, if he/she accepts it (rather than a bib) for easy cleanup.
- If the memory-impaired older adult forgets soon after the meal that he/she has eaten, provide nutritious nibble foods. Depending on his/her particular nutritional needs and preferences, these could be cubes of cheese and low salt whole grain crackers, nuts, or celery and carrot sticks.
- The memory-impaired older adult may forget to swallow his/her food. If he/she tends to carry it around in his/her mouth, provide soft foods than require very little chewing.
- See **Tip Sheet on Eating** for suggestions regarding adaptive eating utensils that may extend the ability of the memory-impaired older adult to eat independently.
- Weight loss is common for memory-impaired older adults. Monitor his/her weight and consult the physician if this happens. Reversible causes of the weight loss should be explored and a nutritional supplement may be recommended.

If you have not cooked meals in the past and are now responsible for cooking for yourself and an older adult, consider getting one meal a day from Meals on Wheels (612-623-3363). Also, cookbooks are available that feature simple-to-fix meals for two.