

COMFORT FOOD

CARING FOR YOUR PARENTS: EDUCATION FOR THE FAMILY CAREGIVER®



 Home
Instead
SENIOR CARE®
To us, it's personal.

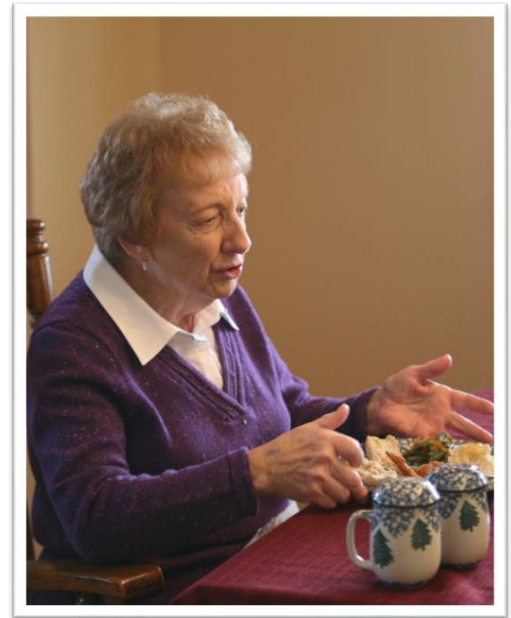
Many seniors lack good nutrition which is dangerous for both their physical and psychological health. As well, seniors may miss companionship and the feeling of a shared family experience at meal time. This lack of socialization means that seniors who live alone may be more at risk for poor nutritional health.

There are also some aging and medical conditions that might cause your parent to alter his or her eating habits, resulting in diminished health. These conditions include:

- Loss of the ability to taste and/or smell,
- Physical challenges,
- Loss of appetite,
- Dementia and other cognitive problems,
- Depression, and
- Transportation and budget issues.

Interestingly, a majority of seniors who live alone say they eat more nutritiously and the food actually tastes better when eating with others. However, the most common obstacle preventing these seniors from sharing more meals is that their family and friends don't have enough time.

In this workshop, we'll look at ways to help your senior loved one have better nutrition and eating habits. We'll provide tips on how to help your parent shop for foods that are highly nutritious and loaded with important vitamins, minerals and fiber. Then, we will give you some tips on how to prepare healthy and tasty meals. Also, we'll look at how to engage your senior loved one in more meaningful conversation, providing the vital companionship they need in order to have a happy and enjoyable mealtime experience.



HOW OUR SENIOR LOVED ONES FEEL ABOUT MEALS AND EATING

For most of us, eating isn't just a matter of getting the food and nutrition we need to stay healthy – it is a social gathering where we share with others.

For some, a leisurely brunch with friends is a regular occurrence. Others plan elaborate dinner parties. Then there are the big holiday gatherings where extended families come together to celebrate. On a more day-to-day basis, many families work hard to juggle busy schedules in order to create a cohesive meal time where everyone can sit together. Truly, meal time is a social event for many.

There are others however, who have a different, less joyful experience when it comes to their daily meals and this can include our senior loved ones. In the United States, approximately 40% of the population age 75 and older – some 6.7 million people – live alone according to the US Census Bureau. These seniors face significant socialization challenges, particularly related to lack of shared mealtime experiences that most of us often taken for granted.

The Home Instead Senior Care® network conducted a first-of-its-kind study to measure mealtime routines, challenges and preferences of seniors age 75 plus who live by themselves in their own homes or apartments. The results of the study show that:

- One in five seniors says he or she sometimes, or most of the time, feels lonely when eating alone. In fact, they say their biggest mealtime challenge is the lack of shared family experience, including lack of companionship.
- As a result of this lack of socialization at mealtime, some 44% of seniors who live alone show at least four warning signs of poor nutritional health.

- There are several factors, in addition to loneliness, that contribute to poor nutrition. Approximately 23% of seniors have insufficient funds to buy the food they need. Others don't have access to transportation to get themselves to the grocery store on a regular basis. For those who do shop, it's often easier to purchase pre-made or convenience foods that don't require prep work and lack the good nutritional value found in fresh fruits and vegetables.

Certainly there are many seniors suffering from poor nutrition and struggling with meals.

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WHAT PREVENTS A SENIOR FROM HAVING GOOD NUTRITION, AND WHAT TO WATCH FOR

There are a number of factors that may cause your parent to alter his or her eating habits:

- **Diminished sense of taste and smell.** As we age, we lose some of our ability to taste and smell. Certain medications can affect these senses as well, so your senior loved one might say that food “doesn't taste like it used to.” As a result, some seniors choose to eat less, or not at all, which means they are not getting proper nutrients.
- **Physical challenges.** Older adults may have challenges such as dental problems and reduced ability to produce saliva, making chewing and swallowing difficult. These problems can cause certain foods to become off limits causing our parents to opt for something that might be more convenient, but less nutritious.
- **Reduced appetite.** Appetites can take a big hit from several factors. Some examples include recovering from an illness or surgery, or living with a chronic condition such as heart disease or arthritis.
- **Dementia and other cognitive problems.** Seniors with cognitive issues can forget to eat, or be unable to prepare foods safely. They may also lose the ability to determine if a food is spoiled or unfit to eat. As a result, they can become malnourished.
- **Transportation and budget issues.** These challenges can prevent seniors from shopping for groceries or getting them home.
- **Loneliness and grief.** It is a sad reality that getting older means losing loved ones. Loneliness and grief are normal, but they can also overwhelm and cause seniors to withdraw from life – and from eating.

How do you tell if your parent is suffering from poor nutrition?

1. Look for either **sudden weight loss or weight gain.** Any big change that happens relatively quickly should be considered a red flag.
2. Do a quick **visual health assessment.** Look at your parent's color and skin texture. How are their eyes? Do they look tired and slack, or are they vibrant?

3. Make sure your senior loved one stays well-hydrated. When someone is not eating they may also not be drinking enough water or fluids. Some **signs of dehydration** in the elderly include chronic fatigue and lethargy, as well as confusion, weakness, dizziness and a change in blood pressure when standing.

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HOW TO MAKE MEALTIME ENJOYABLE

Grocery shopping can be a chore, but for many seniors it's an important part of feeling competent and providing for themselves. Here's how to keep grocery shopping a regular, enjoyable occasion:

- Have your senior bring a friend or two along to share transportation costs and socialize.
- Encourage him or her to shop at off-peak hours. The aisles are less crowded and it's easier to move at a slower pace.
- Have your senior bring a list. That way he or she will avoid making impulse buys and won't spend more than planned.
- Focus on buying healthy foods packed with nutrition such as:
 - Dark green leafy vegetables like kale, spinach and broccoli. These all contain potassium, Vitamin C and are rich in fiber.
 - Healthy whole grain and fortified cereals that make for an easy meal any time of day.
 - Berries and citrus fruits loaded with Vitamin C and antioxidants. They are great for snacks along with low-fat or fat-free yogurt.
 - Protein-rich eggs and fish, especially salmon and tuna that have heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

Once your senior has all of these healthy foods, here are some tips to make any meal more delicious:

- Try healthy, flavorful fats like olive or walnut oil which enhance foods' flavors and make them more satisfying.
- Sprinkle in lemon juice, vinegar or some seasonings like fresh or dried herbs and spices to add variety and flavor.
- Don't forget a touch of sweet. Even with diminished senses, seniors tend to retain their taste for sweetness. Use naturally sweet foods like sweet potatoes, fruits, and caramelized onions or adjust flavors with a little sugar, honey or maple syrup.
- Add a little conversation and companionship. Simple questions can lead to hours of conversation and provide the much needed companionship your senior loved one needs.

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IMPORTANT NUTRITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SENIORS

As we age, our bodies usually don't need as much food as they did when we were younger. Because seniors tend to be less active, they burn fewer calories. However, seniors still need just as many nutrients, and sometimes more.

Here are some of the key nutrients that should be included in a senior's diet:

- **Calcium.** This nutrient helps keep bones strong and prevents fractures. Great sources of calcium can be found in low-fat or fat-free milk and yogurt as well as green leafy vegetables, calcium-fortified orange juice and soy products.
- **Fiber.** Also called roughage, fiber helps keep foods moving along in the digestive tract. Some types of fiber can also help lower cholesterol. Great sources include whole grains, beans and legumes, vegetables and fruits.
- **Fluid.** You might not consider this a nutrient, but getting enough fluid is critical to good health. Our sense of thirst tends to decline as we get older, so in order to prevent dehydration, seniors need to drink fluids regularly, whether thirsty or not.

Also, there are a couple of important vitamins:

- **Vitamin D.** This vitamin is vital for bone health because it helps the body absorb calcium. The body makes vitamin D when skin is directly exposed to the sun. However as we get older, our bodies become less able to make Vitamin D, so it's very important for seniors to get enough from other sources, such as foods and supplements. Great sources include fluid milk or Vitamin D-fortified items such as yogurt, margarine, soy beverages and orange juice.
- **Vitamin B12.** With aging, it becomes harder for the body to absorb this vitamin which is essential for healthy nerves and blood cells. Some seniors may require supplements or B12 injections. Some great food sources include meats, fish and shellfish, fortified cereals, and tofu.

Even though a senior might need extra nutrients, there are easy and convenient food sources and supplements that can ensure that they are getting the healthy meals they need to remain vibrant.

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