



Malnutrition in the Aging Population



Nutrition is an important part of aging and living well. Good nutrition can help maintain a healthy immune system and physical function, improve recovery from illness or injury, and reduce the risk of chronic conditions. According to Defeat Malnutrition at least one out of two older adults is at risk of becoming, or is already, malnourished. It is estimated that in the United States disease-associated malnutrition (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, congestive heart failure, etc.) in older adults' costs \$51.3 billion every year. With Texas' aging population expected to more than double from 2000 to 2030, it is important to raise awareness of the prevalence of malnutrition in older adults, the associated cost burden, and the health impacts.

Malnutrition is a state of poor nutritional health. This could be a deficiency of nutrients (under nourished) or an excess of nutrients (over-nourished).^{3,13} Because of different age-related factors, such as decreased physical function and cognitive decline, many older adults might already be malnourished without a diagnosis.^{2,5,10,13} For this reason, it is important to conduct nutrition screenings (ideally alongside a registered dietitian) and have the ability to identify the signs and symptoms.^{4,9}

Key Points

- Older adults are typically diagnosed as under nourished.¹³
- Over 20 percent of older Texans are food insecure¹, which can lead to lower fruits and vegetable intake, as well as skipping meals.^{12, 15}
- 9.3 percent of Texans 65 and older live below the poverty level with many having to decide between paying for food and medicine or utilities.^{14,15}
- Malnutrition is associated with longer hospital stays, decreased quality of life, and greater morbidity.^{2,4}
- Risk factor identification and intervention can prevent, slow or correct malnutrition.⁵
- Simple screenings can help ensure older adults are receiving the nutrition they need.⁸ Many nutrition screening tools are available for to help assess, diagnose, and develop intervention plans.^{7,9}

Risk Factors, Signs and Symptoms

Risk factors for malnutrition vary across different categories.⁶ These risk factors range from medication interaction to food insecurity.⁶ Signs and symptoms of malnutrition in older adults are subtle and can go undetected, therefore it is important that nutrition assessments are performed to identify people at risk of being malnourished. Everyone can help with efforts to reduce, slow or prevent malnutrition in older adults by knowing the signs, symptoms and risk factors.

Risk Factors

- Food insecurity
- Loss of appetite
- Limited income
- Poor dental health
- Trouble chewing and swallowing
- Chronic conditions
- Medication interaction and side effects
- Social isolation
- Depression
- Dementias
- Limited mobility

Signs and Symptoms

- Unplanned or unexplained weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Unable to eat or can only eat small amounts
- Feeling weak or tired
- Swelling or fluid accumulation
- Increase in illness or infection
- Feeling irritable or depressed
- Delayed wound healing
- Loss of muscle mass or subcutaneous fat

Recommendations

- Know the signs and symptoms of malnutrition and recommend or provide a nutritional screening for people at risk.
- Review "*National Blueprint: Achieving Malnutrition Care for Older Adults*" from Defeat Malnutrition to identify strategies you can implement.
- Provide older adults and their caregivers with information and resources on malnutrition.
- Collaborate with other professionals (aging service providers, medical, dietitians, etc) to address malnutrition in your community.
- Advocate for policies to address malnutrition at the organization, local, and state levels.

Resources

Malnutrition Awareness

- Defeat Malnutrition— defeatmalnutrition.today
- National Council on Aging - ncoa.org/healthy-aging/chronic-disease/nutrition-chronic-conditions/

Malnutrition Assessments and Screening Tools

- National Council on Aging - ncoa.org/assessments-tools/malnutrition-screening-assessment-tools/
- Hartford School for Geriatric Nursing - consultgeri.org/try-this/general-assessment/issue-9.pdf

Nutrition Resources for Older Adults

- Texercise — texercise.com
- Nutrition for Seniors — nutrition.gov/subject/life-stages/seniors
- Eating Healthy on a Budget — foodsmartcolorado.colostate.edu/nutrition-and-health/healthy-eating/1healthy-eating-for-older-adults/1healthy-eating-on-a-budget-for-older-adults/
- National Council on Aging — ncoa.org/economic-security/benefits/food-and-nutrition/senior-nutrition
- Help with Food Costs — nia.nih.gov/health/publication/whats-your-plate/help-food-costs

Food Assistance

- Meals on Wheels — mealsonwheelstexas.org
- SNAP benefits — yourtexasbenefits.hhsc.texas.gov/programs/snap
- Texas Food Pantries — foodpantries.org/st/texas
- The Emergency Food Assistance Program — fns.usda.gov/tefap/emergency-food-assistance-program-tefap

Citations

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