



Mindful Eating: The Link Between Malnutrition and Dementia

Aging is inevitable, and as we begin to notice the impact on the body, we often see how it also affects the spirit and mind. When a loved one begins to show signs of dementia, it can be a whirlwind of emotions, decisions, and changes. Dementia is a general term that describes the symptoms accompanying a decline in mental ability due to brain injury or disease. It interferes with an individual's daily life by causing memory loss, irritability, faltering language skills, ability to focus, lapses in judgment, and visual perception. Estimates show that by 2030 over 20% of people 65 and older will have dementia.

A lesser known but serious side effect of dementia is that it causes loss of appetite and difficulty swallowing. It could also cause a senior to accidentally skip a meal or forget to buy food from the store. This ultimately leads to a significant problem of malnutrition. On top of this, a malnourished older adult with dementia can start experiencing anxiety and depression. Therefore, understanding how to prevent malnourishment among seniors with dementia is vital.

Luckily, factors that can cause can detect malnutrition through observation and conversation. Keep an eye out for these common causes of malnutrition.

Malnutrition: Warning Signs

Loss of Appetite

Common reasons seniors lose their appetite are side effects of medication, lack of exercise, difficulty swallowing, or development of disgust for certain types of food. Seventy-five percent of Americans over 50 take at least one medication, and the side effects are difficult to combat. Consulting a doctor to discuss different medication options can often help.

Loss of Senses

Another factor that is often difficult to overcome is the loss of the senses. Problems with the senses can occur in dementia patients. They can lead to misjudgment of temperature, loss of smell, loss of taste, and even the loss of spatial recognition. The loss of smell and taste can severely eliminate the incentive to eat, as they are imperative for enjoying food and wanting to eat. A misjudgment of temperature can lead to severe burns. At the same time, the loss of spatial recognition can make it hard to distinguish the food from the plate.

Bad Food Influences

The brain needs healthy fuel to perform correctly and will have trouble operating on a poor diet. A diet that contains complex carbohydrates, processed foods, and sugar stimulates the production of toxins in the body. Those toxins can lead to inflammation, the build-up of plaques in the brain, and impair cognitive function.

Caregivers: How to Help

Training caregivers who deal with dementia on how malnutrition can affect seniors and how it can be prevented becomes a crucial part of daily care.

Increase Appetite

Preparing a person's favorite meals can drastically improve their desire to eat. Simple and easy exercises, such as a daily walk or indoor chair exercises, can increase the appetite. Understanding a senior's culinary likes and dislikes is crucial. Discuss their favorite foods, take special note of likes and dislikes, and prepare meal plans based on this information.

Heighten Senses

Once caregivers recognize a loss of senses, they can begin to identify what foods the senior can and cannot taste and prepare more appropriate options. One trick to help spatial recognition is to use white plates to contrast the food's colors; this helps to lessen confusion. Caregivers should also always check that the food temperature is appropriate.

If swallowing has become difficult, a simple technique to try during mealtime is to have a caregiver make gentle touches to the senior's throat or give verbal reminders to help a senior be able to swallow.

Good Food Influences

Preparing meals containing healthy fats, fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and adequate vitamins and minerals help boost memory and has other positive effects on the body. Most of the diseases that older people suffer result from a lack of proper diet.

Nutrition is essential to everyone's life. To help seniors fight the effects of aging, caregivers should practice constant communication and patience and watch out for behaviors that may signal poor eating habits. Quick intervention can stave off longer-term problems and keep seniors in better health for both body and brain.